



番目は北国産の
ツンドラ王妃？

野村美月

Mizuki Nomura

ill. 竹岡美穂

Miho Takeoka

道程

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His noble and righteous route to the Harem

ファミ通文庫

His Noble and Righteous Route to the Harem

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by Mizuki Nomura

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Prologue

The horse carriage transporting an affluent person reflected a silver luster in the cold morning sun.

On the doors of the carriage is a unicorn-shaped crest symbolizing rule over the empire of the north. Upon the grandiose doors opening, Ludwik stood and watched in awe as his eyes took in the astonishingly dainty feet covered by silver shoes resting neatly against each other atop the red velvet of the footstep.

The ankles peeking out from the hem of a soft and voluminous dress are as white as snow. The waist is slender enough to be grasped with two hands, and the chest swelled modestly.

An elegant chin, tightly-knit lips that gives the impression of a strong will, a small and pointed nose, violet eyes that look cool to the touch like a gem, and golden hair that shines brightly. All these features jumped into Ludwik's sight one after another, causing him to swallow a breath in one gulp.

(This' person' is' my' bride'?)

It was as if elegance itself was frozen for preservation. As Ludwik was entranced by such beauty, the princess from the north cast her golden eyelashes downward and turned her head abruptly, muttering with a chilling countenance

In the language that existed since the beginning of the world, the language thought to be the most beautiful and refined, the language known as Endranese,

“..... Zloth (gross).”

Chapter 1: How the Young Master of a Dressmaker Became King and Welcomed a Princess from the North as His Bride

“As such, we will have Your Highness welcome the princess from the highest lineage on the continent as Sire’s bride.”

Ludwik was told this respectfully by his close aide Adelheid on a sultry summer afternoon.

“Eh? Marry? Me’?”

Adelheid is someone who is always calm no matter the situation. Ludwik gazes back at his grand chamberlain with wide eyes while sitting in the chair of his office.

The shortly trimmed ashen hair and the gray eyes together give others an impression of composure. The beautiful aide of unknown age answers blankly with a voice that is low for a woman and lips that are red for a man.

“Indeed, since the current King of Rhodesia is Your Highness Ludwik.”

“Adelheid... I’m still only seventeen.”

“The average age of marriage in our nation is nineteen for men and seventeen for women. Your Highness is only two years early, and if we consider the royal average instead, Sire is way past the age at which he ought to have a partner.”

“Mmm, it’s true that the previous kings married young, but hey, I’m a half-commoner and worked at a dressmaker as recently as a month ago when I was suddenly told that I’m the illegitimate child of the previous king. Just like that, I was taken to the castle and made king. I still don’t even know what kind of work a king does, and yet I’m being abruptly told to marry...”

Only three days have passed since the coronation.

During that time, all the “work” that Ludwik has done was wear a crown

heavy enough to tear his neck put on him by the archbishop, wave and smile endlessly from the balcony at the populace who had gathered to celebrate, wave and smile some more during the parade at the populace who filled the roadsides, sit while wearing a gaudy mantle with pelt along the ends, and nod with a smile bewilderedly at nobles with long and tedious names as they offered their congratulations.

(I've done nothing but smile at people you know.)

But, Adelheid spoke intelligently and softly without a moment's hesitation.

"The 'most' important 'work' of Your Highness Ludwik is to welcome a princess from a high lineage as your bride."

So she declared.

She's been like this since their first meeting. With a calm expression and a composed and gentle voice, she cuts right to the heart of things.

(At that time it was the same too wasn't it...)

One month ago— at that time, Ludwik was the young master of a dressmaker in the castle town...

"For this summer, I absolutely recommend the openwork cape! It's a perfect fit for your nape which is slender like a swan, Berta. Let me see, yes, and for the bottom a refreshing blue dress that matches your deep blue eyes which remind me of the color of Roger's bronze leaf. The sleeve just long enough not to be vulgar, the waist squeezed tight, and the hem boldly expansive like this."

The small store was filled to the brim with a colorful assortment of textiles, florid laces, and lovely ribbons. The one holding a sketchbook with one arm and running a colored pencil across the page with the other all the while cheerfully speaking to a customer is a young man with impressively lustrous golden hair and bright green eyes. For a commoner, the young lad was pretty and refined.

On the blank white paper, an openwork cape made with the floral patterns of lily, a blue skirt with a lightly flourishing hem, and a girl wearing the clothes with a smile quickly took form and color.

"Look! You're just like a queen!"

Tearing off the completed sketch from his sketchbook, Ludwik smiled with an innocent charm as he handed it over to Berta. Upon seeing the sketch, Berta beamed with her eyes and cheeks and let out a cheer.

“Wow, how lovely! This is me? If I wear Ludy’s recommendations, will I be this beautiful?”

“Berta is beautiful to begin with. But, if you wear these clothes, you’ll become even more beautiful such that everyone becomes dizzy just looking at you.”

“Oh Ludy, you’re so good at flattery. Last time I ended up buying a blouse because of that too. I have to be more economical this month.”

“It’s not flattery. I mean, you also think the clothes will fit you very well upon seeing the sketch right?”

“Mmm...”

“Only someone with an outstanding figure like Berta could pull off a dress with such a tight waistline.”

“Eh? Is, is that so? Well, my waist is the one thing I’m a little confident about.”

“Yeah, Berta is the one who suits this openwork cape and blue dress the most in the world!”

Ludwik, who is called the Prince of Red Deer Street, smiles sweetly. Seeing this, Berta blushes deeply and begins to fidget nervously.

“M-my furniture workshop is making a killing from a large amount of orders right now. It seems there will be a bonus paid out sometime soon...”

“Awesome! If we start tailoring it now, it’ll definitely be finished in time for the summer festival, and so the queen of the summer festival this year is sure to be Berta.”

“Aah, geez! Give me everything from top to bottom, Ludy!”

“Thank you for your patronage! I’ll have our first-rate seamstresses begin tailoring as fast as possible.”

As Ludwik bowed reverently, now other girls who were lying in wait chime in,

“Ludy, I want an all-white outfit for this summer. Sketch me too.”

“Me too! This year seems like it will be hot, so I’m thinking it’ll be fine to show a little arm and chest. Ah, but make it in a cute way not a coarse way. Ludy, will you pick for me?”

“Ludy, draw me as well. This dress that’s laced at the waist is wonderful.”

“Ehhh. Draw me first, Ludy!”

“No way, I’ve also been waiting for soooooo long!”

Ludwik scattered his refreshing business smile toward the girls who are speaking all at once.

“Everyone, I’ll draw you all so don’t push. To make up for having you girls wait in this heat, I’ll prepare some lemon water with honey.”

Ludwik does not forget the little acts of consideration as well.

The store known as “Boris’s shop” on Red Deer Street increased its sales over ten times and is always bustling with female customers since Ludwik at age fourteen began serving customers with a sketchbook and colored pencils.

Ludwik himself felt that this job is his divine calling. He’s liked talking with people since he was a child, and he’s liked talking with girls even more. When he picks out or designs clothes that brings out a girl’s glamor, he gets really excited.

Making Rhodesia a country full of beauties by helping girls be their prettiest is Ludwik’s grand dream. It would be supreme if Rhodesia gained a reputation among neighboring countries as a country where the girls are all fashionable and beautiful.

As Ludwik was living out such a fulfilling normalfag life, she’ suddenly showed up.

When the doors opened without a sound and a young man with a supple figure entered, Ludwik thought, “Huh?”

First, it is difficult to discern his age.

With his experience dealing with customers, Ludwik has confidence in his ability to discern someone’s age and occupation. Yet,

(Eh? Around twenty? No, older than that? Actually he could be in his teens. But, that level of composure is more like a forty-year old. Well, that shouldn't be the case, but really, just how old is he?)

Ludwik struggled to figure it out.

The customer had ashen hair and gray eyes which gave off an intelligent and composed impression. Furthermore, one could tell that he is someone with high status from his clothes and accessories.

Both his cuffs and scarf ring are made of real silver! The engraving on the scarf ring's surface is so detailed and casually stylish despite the design being reserved. It has to be the work of a first-rate artisan. His boots are something else as well.

This isn't someone who would wander into an average dressmaker shop. The clothes and accessories he's wearing could buy twenty dresses from this store. It'd be more accurate to say that there's nothing this store could offer him that he'd want to buy.

Beyond that, what baffled Ludwik even more was—

(Eh... This person is a man... right?)

The red lips and the smooth throat cause Ludwik to look at the chest suspiciously before returning his gaze to a flawless face without a beard or a spot. No way! Ludwik is taken aback in shock.

(Ehh? Could this person be a woman!?)

With a height that is rather tall for a woman, one would assume that she's a man at first glance. However, as Ludwik works as a dressmaker, he knows the difference in both the quality of skin and the bodily proportions between men and women well.

She was a woman wearing man's clothes!

(Why is such a beautiful woman dressed up as a man? Is this kind of play in vogue among the upper class?)

Looking outside the store, there is a big carriage parked. In front and behind the carriage are men with matching uniforms waiting atop their steeds.

(Isn't that green uniform for the king's order of knights? Then, is this person also a knight? Or is she someone being protected by the knights?)

As Ludwik busily organized his thoughts in his head, the crossdressing beauty with refined ashen hair and intelligent gray eyes, a good posture and a look of competence walked straight towards Ludwik with a composed gaze.

As she knelt before him and cast her head downwards, her ashen hair swayed coolly. Then, she spoke reverently.

In a beautiful voice that was low and serene, she spoke the words that would change Ludwik's life.

"I've come to receive you, my new king."

This person was Adelheid, the one who is serving as Ludwik's grand chamberlain now.

The crossdressing beauty of unknown age brought Ludwik, who remained stuck in a daze, to the castle on the hill in a bombastic carriage surrounded by knights.

According to the explanation she gave on the way there, Ludwik is the illegitimate child of King Calvin who died last year.

King Calvin had three princes, but they all succumbed to a vicious cold one after the other. In just one year three new kings have died soon after they were crowned. The townspeople had discussions on rumors about who would become the next King of Rhodesia which Ludwik also participated in.

This country has a third of its territory covered by forest and is a land where fairy tales and folklore are still believed to be true. In such a tranquil and rural small country, everyone carelessly thought that their own lives wouldn't change regardless of who becomes king as they held their mugs filled with cheap beer in one hand.

"None of the three kings had any children. Because it all happened so quickly, we have not had time to select a new king; as such, the throne of our country is currently vacant."

Ludwik responded with a "right..." to Adelheid's words as if the matter didn't

concern him.

“To invite a distant male relative from the royal family of another country or to extend the royal bloodline to a male from the families of the three grand dukes— while that was being discussed, it emerged that King Calvin had another child with a townsgirl. It was decided that if there is a direct descendant of the royal family, it would be best if he succeeded the throne. Once that was decided, I immediately went to receive you.”

It was at this point that Ludwik finally grasped the preposterous circumstance that he was in and began to sweat profusely.

Though he was called the Prince of Red Deer Street in jest, he never even once thought that he would actually be the illegitimate child of the king.

“Umm, Miss Adelheid, are you sure it isn’t some kind of mistake? There’s no way I have royal blood in me...”

“Did you never hear anything from your honorable mother?”

Ludwik’s mother passed away in spring last year from the virulent cold that swept the nation— strangely enough, just a few days before King Calvin died.

She married Ludwik’s stepdad who runs a dressmaker shop when Ludwik was six.

She was a forward-looking person who loved to dance and was always laughing brightly. She helped Ludwik’s stepdad with the store by serving customers cheerfully, livening up the atmosphere.

Before she married Ludwik’s stepdad, Ludwik and his mother lived by themselves and she supported him alone by working as a seamstress. Despite this, Ludwik never felt that his life was affected by lack of money growing up. On days of a festival, he would wear suits that his mom made for him and eat candy on a stick and steamy buns with filling that his mom bought for him. Whenever he asked his mom for art supplies, she would tell him, “If you are a good boy, then as a reward.” and eventually bought him all the tools for a complete set.

Thus, Ludwik never had an impression of his mother as a woman who lived in the shadows for raising a child born out of wedlock. Rather, she was a blissful

and indomitable person who lived life to the fullest right up until she passed away.

(Speaking of which... I think mother did say that my father is the king.)

—Ludy, your father is, believe it or not, the King of Rhodesia!

Having young Ludwik sit on top of her knees, she told the story over and over again with a smile full of playfulness.

—That person was still the prince at that point. He snuck away from the castle to the town on the day of the Autumn Festival and fell in love with a cute townsgirl.

It felt like one of the fairy tales adults in Rhodesia told children to lull them to sleep, like the stories of the faeries who live in the green forest and their land of paradise that exists somewhere in the forest.

Ludwik's mother's voice and expression were both full of bliss as if she was floating in the midst of a fluffy dream, but also carried a hint of comedy and mischief as she recited the story to Ludwik.

—I'm a commoner through and through and knew I wouldn't be able to live in a castle so we parted ways, but your father gave me a large sum of money to raise you with. I told him I couldn't possibly need this much and returned most of it, but I kept more than enough for us to live comfortably together.

(She did say that! The story about my father being the king wasn't a joke!)

She told the story so cheerfully that Ludwik had assumed that it had to be his mom's creation. To think it would be real—

As Ludwik was taking in this earth-shattering revelation, Adelheid inquired with a composed voice.

“Your Highness Ludwik has a birthmark on the left arm in the shape of a honeywort right?”

“Y-yes.”

“That's something hereditary to those of the royal bloodline. The king before King Calvin— Your Highness Ludwik's grandfather also had such a birthmark but on his chest.”

“Is that so!”

“Yes, and aside from this, Your Highness Ludwik should also have the Grand Jade Seal which is the proof of being King Calvin’s son.”

Being told this, Ludwik thought of the jade seal that his mother gave him before dying. It was about as big as an egg and had the shape of a linden tree engraved onto it. Ludwik had been using it as a makeshift paperweight...

(Ehhhhhhhhh! That seal is the royal seal? Now that I think about it, the linden tree is also featured on Rhodesia’s flag. I’ve been using it as a paperweight though as I don’t sign my name much in daily life and when I do it seems more trouble to use than just to use a pen... Geh!)

The amount of sweat spurting out of Ludwik increased even more.

“I-I have it... the paperweight— I mean, the seal.”

Ludwik responded with a stiff voice, to which Adelheid gave a refined nod.

“From the proofs above, it is unmistakable that Your Highness Ludwik is the son of King Calvin. Above all, Sire’s face bears a striking resemblance to King Calvin.

“Is that so... I see.”

Ludwik only saw the king’s face once or twice from afar, so he couldn’t recall an image even if he tried. Ludwik’s late mother would sometimes gaze intently at Ludwik’s face and say,

“Your face really is elegant. And when you laugh it’s simply charming. You have to be thankful to your father for having been born with such a pretty face.”

As she brushed Ludwik’s golden hair with her fingers, she would look upon Ludwik fondly with her eyes gently narrowed. This was all Ludwik had to work with as far as what his father’s face looked like.

However, with this much evidence gathered up, Ludwik had no choice but to give up. As he traveled toward the castle inside the horse carriage, he thought in a daze,

(If I become king I won’t be able to work even part-time at stepfather’s store,

huh. Even though it was my dream to make Rhodesia into a country full of fashionable beauties...)

“Fortunately, Your Highness Ludwik’s reputation is superb. To be fair, it is in comparison to the three previous kings who were all a bit eccentric. Even so, the level of eloquence and refinement despite being half-commoner along with the humility Sire has displayed has caused Sire’s approval rating to swell among the nobles. The populace on the other hand feels a sense of closeness precisely because Sire is half-commoner. Sire is highly reputed as a golden-haired Adonis among the women.”

“I-I don’t think my looks are good enough to be called an Adonis.”

Ludwik had fairly good looks with his golden hair and green eyes, so he was called names like the handsome young master or the Prince of Red Deer Street in jest when he worked as the young master of Boris’s Shop. However, he could only be called an Adonis on a regional level at most.

Ludwik thinks that to be called an Adonis on a national level would demand the appearance of someone like Adelheid (though she’s a woman).

“If looked upon from afar, Your Highness is more than equipped to be called an Adonis. After all, if looked upon from afar, one would not be able to clearly make out Sire’s face. Indeed, if looked upon from afar, one would only be able to see Sire’s golden hair.”

“...Thank you.”

You didn’t have to say “if looked upon from afar” three times... Ludwik thought but was unable to retort.

“Besides Your Highness’s looks, remember the female knight on guard at the parade? Being pushed around by the crowd, she fell off her horse and tumbled onto the road, landing flat on her butt. To help her up, Sire personally got off the carriage and lent a hand to her. That was exceedingly swell; it truly hit the spot. It was a great production that sold Sire’s kind and refreshing style.”

“It wasn’t a production. Seeing a proud knight who wore her uniform with dignity stuck on the ground with a flushed face was a pitiful sight so I just felt like I had to give her a follow-up.”

Without thinking, Ludwik had casually opened the door and stuck his foot out from the carriage as if he was still a commoner.

Are you alright? Did you get hurt anywhere? Ludwik asked while taking her hand and helping her up. This made the female knight, who was similar in age to Ludwik, even redder as she became flustered.

Seeing that, the populace who crammed the parade course full heightened their cheers more than ever, fervently singing praises like “Long live King Ludwik!” and “How wonderful, Your Highness.” and “What a kind person His Majesty must be.”

Ludwik really had no intention to help her as a PR stunt.

“Your Highness need not keep up the act around me, but please answer as such around others.”

“I mean it though...”

Adelheid coolly ignored Ludwik’s grumble. To serve as the king’s close aide despite being a woman must mean she’s exceptionally talented, but her calculating tendency makes Ludwik nervous every now and then.

Adelheid calmly informs Ludwik,

“There is a faction in Rhodesia who are displeased with the fact that Your Highness ascended the throne. The faction includes the head of the Walter family, who is one of the Three Grand Dukes. It seems he had intended to make his third year old grandson, a cousin of the royal family, into the king and wield power as the prime minister. From various entanglements of interests among the affluent, the number of those who support the Walter family is not trivial. Therefore, the fact that Sire was able to present Sire’s self as a monarch with qualities that can gain the heart of the people is very thankful. I wouldn’t mind giving a reward to that female knight for her help in that. But, that alone is not enough. Sire needs powerful backers behind him and an heir born between Sire and a queen with a noble bloodline. To achieve both those goals at once, the quickest way is to welcome a bride from a powerful country. This is why I have been saying that the most important job of Your Highness is to do just that.”

Having this explained to him cogently in a gentle voice left no room for

Ludwik to protest by saying something like “I still think it’s too early for me to marry.” or “To begin with I want to marry someone I love.”.

“I’d like to confirm just in case– Does Your Highness have any unique sexual fetishes?”

“Sexu– what’d you say?”

Ludwik peeled his eyes wide open at suddenly being asked such a terrible question. Seeing this, Adelheid replied coolly,

“With all due respect, I’m asking whether Your Highness prefers making love normally or not. Speaking confidentially, Clovis, the eldest son of King Calvin, loved horses; he told his wife he wanted to divorce her and marry a horse, causing her to return to her family in indignation. Martias, the second son, had mysophobia and said he didn’t want to touch women as they are dirty. Miltruss, the third son, loved men and declared that he wasn’t interested in any brides that were women; he courted me when I first came to serve him, but scolded me upon finding out I’m a woman, saying ‘So you tried to fool me by pretending to be a man huh, you slut!’... That’s why I was wondering about Sire’s preferences.”

“I like human girls’ like any other man! Yes!”

“I’m relieved to hear that. Then, there should be no problem in welcoming our new queen.

Adelheid nonchalantly informs Ludwik,

“The truth is, Your Highness’s fiancée has already been prepared.”

Your Highness’s partner is the Third Princess of the Endrish Empire.

Coming from the Grand Empire of the North is a country several dozen times bigger than our country, she is someone with extremely high status. In two months, she will be coming to Rhodesia to join Your Highness in marriage.

Ludwik was left in a daze when Adelheid had finished briefing him of his fiancée with a poker face. Adelheid then put on a pointlessly seductive smile as she pulled out an Endrish dictionary and handed it to Ludwik.

“Now that you know that, let’s study together.”

“S-study?”

Ludwik looked down at the dictionary with a magnificent binding and the title engraved in gold.

Endrish has been around since the beginning of human history and has also been called the world’s most beautiful and refined language. The citizens of the Endrish Empire are immensely proud of their country’s history and culture. Even when they travel to foreign countries, they obstinately insist on speaking their own language.

“So, in order to be able to hold a basic conversation with Princess Katerina, please memorize the following lines.

Adelheid handed a handwritten text to Ludwik in addition.

“Ar (Yes).”

“Noi (No).”

In addition to these simple words, there was also the greeting

“Monis dehra (Nice to meet you).”

and

“El stella revarnya toris bela (It is my honor to meet you. How beautiful you are.)”

“Loui erma amalose (Please accept my love.)”

“Toris desta erma lowarne (Please let me touch your lovely lips.)”

“Toris falna luua el silranu stee (I want to smell your skin’s aroma more closely.)”

“Toris folia chichaery kees el pharma (I want to listen to your heartbeat directly.)”

Seductive lines like these are also listed.

Furthermore, nauseatingly sweet sentences like the above covered more than half of the text. The further down the list one goes, the more unrestrained the lines become.

“Erma ruise coalea silmuddrard (Please have my children.)”

It was way too direct.

“Just what part of this teaches me the necessary vocabulary for a basic conversation, Adelheid! Telling a girl “Please have my children.” right after you meet her will make her shrink back in horror, understand?”

However, Adelheid replied with a face that couldn’t be cooler,

“Princess Katerina is coming to our country as Your Highness’s fiancée.” To bear an heir is a duty that Princess Katerina must promptly fulfill as well. Therefore, if Sire whispers these lines passionately into her ears, I’m sure she’ll be so touched that she’ll jump right into your arms.”

“You think so—?”

Ludwik is skeptical.

However, it’s no question that Adelheid knows more about noblewomen than Ludwik, who has lived a town life up to now, does. While considering that that might really be how political marriages play out, Ludwik read the text aloud as he was told.

“E-el stella revarnya t-toris bela (It is my honor to meet you. How beautiful you are.)”

“It’s toris, not totoris. Instead of saying “you” you ended up saying “wild boar.” If you would like that kind of play, it can’t be helped, but please restrain yourself until you have an heir at least.”

“Toris falna ...luua ...luua el s-silranu s-s-s-stee (I want to smell your skin’s aroma more closely.)”

“Please pour more emotion into luua and say it passionately.”

“Oi, how am I supposed to seduce someone looking at me with an apathetic face like that? It’s impossible.”

Upon hearing Ludwik complain, Adelheid’s expression turned even more subdued.

“My face has always been like this. Actually, I think it’s perfect to practice on someone who’s completely uninterested just in case so that Your Highness will be hardened enough to whisper sweet nothings continuously without faltering on the real deal.”

“I don’t want to do something so unproductive.”

“If Your Highness can melt the other party’s heart, it won’t end up being unproductive. I hear that Sire is supposed to be adept at seducing women.”

“What are you talking about?”

“From the government report, it is said that you had your hands full of women all the way from a five year old little girl on one end to a retired granny on the other. Well done.”

“What! From a little girl to a retired g-granny! All I did was treat my customers sincerely— I didn’t have my hands full of anything! That government report is wrong okay!”

Rather, even though he was entirely encircled by women, he didn’t have a single lover.

“It’s true that lots of women came to the store whether it be young girls or alluring married women. Everyone wanted to talk to me privately, but all I did

was listen to their love problems and give advice!”

Ludwik confessed the truth behind his playboy image.

“For some reason, everyone assumed I was well-versed in relationships. Seeing girls act despondently or even outright cry in front of me, a sense of duty swelled within me and made me feel like I had to do something for them.”

And so, it was the usual pattern that as Ludwik listened intimately to the girls’ troubles and gave them advice, he would end up falling in love with them.

—Can’t it be me?

When Ludwik said that, the girls would always say,

—Oh stop teasing. I know how crazy popular you are Ludy. Thanks, I can see that you’re trying to console me. After all, there’s no way Ludy can be serious about an average girl like me. In the end, I think someone like him is just right for me. He’s not as handsome as Ludy nor as considerate, but I think he’s the best match for me.

Like that, they either didn’t take Ludwik seriously at all, or even if they did take him seriously and leaned toward him for a moment, they always went back to their original lovers in the end.

—I love that person. You have a whole bunch of girls who like you Ludy, but he only has me.

And so, whether it be artless youthful girls or sophisticated married women, the girls that Ludwik loved would all smile and say without exception when they left,

—Thanks, Ludy. You really are a good person!

Good person!

Is there any other title as pathetic as this for a man?

The expression indicates that one isn’t seen as a romantic interest. As such, even if someone calls him a prince or popular enough to be encircled by girls, Ludwik will feel no joy.

Because the truth is, he’s just a “good person.”

To Ludwik who was whining about his past that he recalled, Adelheid pointed out reposefully,

“But, there are a few good memories mixed in there as well no?”

“Ugh.”

“For example, Anabel, the daughter of an apple orchard; Matilda, the daughter of a blacksmith; Birgitte, the daughter of a ribbon shop; Ulrika, who married a shoemaker this spr—”

“Ahhhhhhhh!”

Ludwik lifted his bottom from the chair and shouted.

(Why is she speaking as if she saw what happened? With Anabel it was just a little kiss; as for Matilda I just hugged her shoulders close when we took shelter from the rain; similarly for Birgitte I simply embraced her from behind when I told her “I’ll wish for your happiness with him”; and for Ulrika who became a shoemaker’s wife it was also just...)

“Aaaaaadelheid, that’s a state secret so keep it to yourself. All those girls reconciled with their lovers and are getting along well, so don’t create a storm!”

Adelheid answers calmly while staring back at Ludwik with her sagacious gray eyes,

“Understood. Your Highness need say no more. To begin with, it’s not my intention to criticize Sire. I only meant to say that if Sire gets serious about seducing, I think any woman would end up melting.”

“Is that so? Have you melted, Adelheid?”

“No, not at all.”

Being told this with a blank expression, Ludwik feels dejected.

Adelheid’s family couldn’t give birth to a male successor, so Adelheid’s been educated as a boy since the age of ten. Despite her competence, Ludwik can’t help but think something went awry in her emotional development. But then, when he previously said in sympathy,

“I see... to become a worthy successor, you stifle your emotions and conduct

yourself calmly.”

Adelheid gazed at him sagaciously,

“No, this was my personality to begin with. I think it’s precisely because I’m like this that my father decided to let me succeed the house.”

She answered.

(It’s such a shame given her beauty. Her age remains a mystery though.)

To Ludwik, who has dropped his shoulders and left them drooping forward, Adelheid says calmly, “Now then, let’s continue.”

“If Your Highness falters from just this it would be problematic. Princess Katerina is seventeen years old. For an imperial daughter, her age is that of an unsold leftover. Because of that, we were able to successfully arrange to have her marry into the royal family of such a small rural country. We must have her bear us a magnificent heir by all means. As a side note, the other candidates were a five year old princess and a thirty-five year old noblewoman who was widowed three times.”

“A five year old!”

That’s the same age as Ida from the florist next door! Marrying such a little child is unthinkable.

“Leaving aside the widow, the five year old princess would have needed some time before she could give birth so I was troubled as well.”

“Trouble yourself on other matters! After all, it was wrong at the point that a five year old was chosen as a candidate!”

Adelheid replied earnestly to what Ludwik pointed out,

“It is not an unusual age for royal marriages. Well, it’s a problem that our country has no heirs at the moment, so I’m really glad that we were able to get Princess Katerina to come. Given that Your Highness is half commoner, I figured we had to find a candidate with high blood. I asked around here and there hunting for big fish with low expectations. I was beginning to give up after being rejected from all corners when I received an affirmative reply from the biggest fish among the big fish. It’s a miracle no doubt.”

“...I’m glad the five year old princess isn’t the one coming to marry me.”

To Ludwik’s mutterance, Adelheid nodded deeply as if to say, “I know right?”.

“Princess Katerina has the divine blood of the emperor of the grand empire with three thousand years of history. Being at the top of high lineage on the continent as well, she’s more than qualified to keep the Duke Walter’s faction in check. To Your Highness, she is as magnificent a partner as can be. Even if she’s a bit of a leftover, and her features are a bit, you know, and her figure is a bit, you know, and her fetishes are a bit, you know, we must have you whisper words of love into her ears wholeheartedly.”

“Is Princess Katerina so bad that you had to ominously omit the details three times over!?”

Ludwik couldn’t help but retort upon hearing Adelheid’s description.

Ludwik is by no means someone who focuses on physical appearance.

He believes that all girls are lovely and that there’s no such thing as an unattractive woman in this world. He feels joy when he helps accentuate a woman’s natural charm by picking out clothes and accessories for her.

But just how bad is she to be described so ambiguously?

The image of an incredibly fuzzy white creature, much bigger than a bear, that inhabits the northern lands formed murkily in Ludwik’s mind.

The dress that suits her’...

It’s no good! Nothing comes to mind!

“Please rest assured. I hear that Princess Katerina is an exceptional beauty with brilliant golden hair, noble violet eyes, and white porcelain-like skin.

Feeling relieved, Ludwik thinks,

(I see, so the princess is an exceptional beauty.)

As he filled his heart with sweet and sour expectations,

“It’s just that-”

Adelheid gently lowered her eyebrows, which had the same ashen color as her hair.

As Ludwik anxiously awaits her next words,

“Never mind... It is best left unsaid.”

“Ehh! You’re stopping there? Don’t leave me hanging! Pray tell. It’s just—what?”

“It’s not an important matter. Besides, it often happens that rumors and reality are unlike. Again, even if she is you know, you know, you know, as the monarch of a country Your Highness must keep a resolute heart.”

“Just which is it!?”

Is the princess an exceptional beauty? Or is she you know, you know, you know?

Adelheid coolly ignores Ludwik’s retort.

“Now, seduce me once again while visualizing a you know, you know, you know princess.”

“Grr”

After letting out a groan, Ludwik returned back to his assignment of whispering sweet nothings in Endrish.

It seems that Ludwik won’t know what Princess Katerina looks like until he meets her.

But, as long as she isn’t covered full of bushy white hair, there must be a part of her that’s charming.

Right. Rather than her looks, it’d be great if she is kind and cheery.

And if Ludwik could ask for just one thing—.

(It’d be great if she likes dancing.)

When Ludwik’s mother invited him to dance with her, she would have a smile as airy as a wildflower as she danced. Remembering that, Ludwik naturally released the tension around his mouth.

“Adelheid, can you teach me how to say, “Please have a dance with me.” in Endrish?”

After two months had passed in that manner, autumn came, and the carriage carrying the princess finally arrived at Rhodesia's castle.

Ludwik tried to restrain his pounding heart as he waited for the moment Princess Katerina disembarks the carriage.

Behind him, Adelheid, other important retainers, and knights also lie in wait.

(I can finally meet the princess.)

What kind of person could she be?

Someone that's you know, you know, you know?

Or an exceptional beauty as rumored?

The carriage, bathing in the piercing rays of the morning sun, reflected a silver luster. With its footstep covered with red velvet and unicorn-shaped crest engraved onto the doors, the carriage felt like something that jumped out of the world of stories. As the two doors were opened reverently by two members of the entourage, astonishingly dainty feet covered by silver shoes came first to sight.

Small feet are said to be a sign of nobility.

Next, expensive laces that generously covered the hem of a dress appears. A blue skirt that puffed up fluffily can be seen. A waistline slender enough to snap is reflected in Ludwik's eyes. An elegantly shaped chest, a supple white neck—these features jumped into Ludwik's sight one after another.

Lastly, golden hair elegantly done-up and a small, well-proportioned face surrounding violet eyes that shined coolly were taken in.

That everyone at the spot, including Ludwik, was at a loss for words must be because they were all entranced by Princess Katerina.

An exceptional beauty.

It's not an overstatement to describe the dazzlingly beautiful princess standing before Ludwik as such at all.

Her skin is white and cool like fallen snow, her violet eyes lustrous like a gem,

and her hair golden like melted gold.

(This person is Princess Katerina!)

She looked like she could be the queen of the faeries who ruled the realm deep within the forests.

Drawn in by her exquisite face, Ludwik blushed as he began to walk towards the carriage; however, he quickly realized something was wrong.

Princess Katerina looks terribly unwell.

Her small face is ghastly pale.

Furthermore, with her fine golden eyebrows furrowed, her cheeks stiff, and her temples cramped, she looked extremely displeased.

As soon as she saw Ludwik with her cool violet eyes, she suddenly cast her eyes downward and turned away, muttering,

“...Zloth”

Ludwik didn't know what the princess just said.

(Eh? Huh? What does zloth mean?)

Ludwik recalls the “Collection of Romantic Phrases to Melt the Princess's Heart” that Adelheid created, but nothing like zloth comes to mind.

Zlohtiaron—Are you not feeling well? Ludwik feels there was an expression like that in there, but the moment Princess Katerina verbalized the word, the Endrish entourage shook visibly then froze like a statue made of ice. Judging from that reaction, it definitely doesn't mean something good.

Looking towards Adelheid who speaks Endrish, Ludwik sees that she too has her eyebrows furrowed.

Above all, Ludwik can't help but be bothered by how Princess Katerina is scowling awfully with her faced turned away.

(I don't really know what's going on, but she seems very upset and angry.)

At the very least, she definitely doesn't harbor any good will.

(No, perhaps she's just nervous.)

Ludwik puts on his business smile that he cultivated during his time as the young master of a dressmaker and says with an intimate voice,

“Monis dehra (Nice to meet you.)”

When Ludwik finished speaking, this time the princess suddenly covered her mouth with her slender hands.

(Huh?)



Her gestures signal that she finds unpleasant not only Ludwik’s face but also

his voice, and that she is offended just to be close to him. Ludwik was left dumbfounded for no woman regardless of age had ever reacted to him like this in his life before.

Usually if Ludwik smiled at a girl, most girls would blush and immediately smile back at him to show they harbored good will towards him. And if Ludwik started a conversation with a girl, she would engage him earnestly.

Yet, the princess who came from the north is turning her face away while covering her mouth!

The Endrish entourage seems about to faint, and the Rhodesian entourage is also dead silent.

In this atmosphere, the princess speaks with her face facing downward,
“El voost darel...”

It was a beautiful voice that sounded like the sound that rings when transparent ice and a glass cup strike each other.

However, it was also very cold and disturbing.

Once again, Ludwik didn't know what the princess had said.

(Adelheid said that if I memorize this text, my married life with the queen will be as smooth as butter, but that's not the case.)

Ludwik considers himself well-versed in how to deal with someone who's upset from his years of experience serving customers; however, he did not expect that not speaking the same language would be this much of a handicap.

Adelheid whispered to a flustered Ludwik from behind,

“It seems that Princess Katerina is not feeling well.”

“Eh, ah, you're feeling ill, right?”

Because Ludwik was too nervous, he accidentally spoke in Rhodesian to the princess, upon which she pointed her face, which had been facing downward, sharply towards Ludwik and said something rapidly in Endrish.

The sound of ice shards hitting each other rings inside Ludwik's head.

(Eh? Eh? What's she saying? I don't know, but she's definitely mad. What

should I do? Should I apologize?)

Adelheid couldn't bear to watch this any longer.

"Excuse me."

Adelheid forced herself between the two and spoke directly with Princess Katerina. She exchanged words fluently in Endrish with the princess's attendants as well. After awhile,

"The princess says she is tired from the long journey and wishes to rest at once, so I will guide her to her room."

Adelheid explained. She then began to lead Princess Katerina and her entourage into the castle.

"Eh, aah."

How does one say, "Get well soon." in Endrish again?

While Ludwik was still thinking about that, Princess Katerina passed right by him like the cold northern winds with her pale face sharply pointed downward.

When Ludwik returned to his room and looked up the definition of "Zloth" in his Endrish dictionary, he was shocked.

Zloth, a shortened form of Zlohtis (disgusting) used as slang. Gross. Used mainly as an insult.

"G-gross...?"

So I was called gross by the person who will become my wife! In our first meeting!

TN comments

1. A ‘ symbol placed next to words is commonly used in Japanese novels to accentuate/emphasize words, as in “The‘ most‘ important‘ work‘ of Your Highness Ludwik is to welcome a princess from a high lineage as your bride.”

2. Thought for sure ルドヴィーク (Ludwik) was a misspelling of Ludwig when I started translating, but then found out Ludwik is a Polish given name. The more you learn.

2. “—I love that person. You have a whole bunch of girls who like you Ludy, but he only has me. ”

I thought this was an interesting line. Typically one would think that being popular is all good as it increases your stock in the eyes of others. However, in this case Ludwik being popular made that girl feel like he didn’t need her as much as her original lover, who is presumably a regular bloke. In this way, I suppose it’s possible that being popular is actually potentially a handicap when it comes to love. Humans crave to be needed by others, as it gives us a sense of worth, belonging, and a deep bond. It’s funny though. On one hand, perhaps one could feel special being picked out of lots of different options, but on the other hand, one could also feel diminished and unworthy of being with someone more popular, along with feeling unneeded. What do you guys think?

4. Read my suggestion to readers if you haven’t already.

Chapter 2: The Bride Really Hates the Groom

“I don’t think Princess Katerina wants to marry me...”

That night.

Ludwik muttered with a long face while being helped by Adelheid into a coat for the ball.

Although I said I’m not an Adonis, I was reasonably confident in my looks. At least, to the extent that a girl shouldn’t detest me on first impression. The fresh smile I cultivated from serving customers was perfect as well. I don’t think I made any mistakes speaking Endrish either.

Yet, I was called gross after having her turn her face away from me resolutely.

When Ludwik looked up the other things Princess Katerina mumbled and grumbled afterwards, he felt his heart stabbed mercilessly over and over.

The luncheon was cancelled because Princess Katerina didn’t feel like eating, and when he tried to visit her to see how she’s doing, he was bluntly told to please leave for today, so he hasn’t seen her after her arrival even once.

Rumors about Princess Katerina spread like wildfire inside the castle.

“I hear she’s as beautiful as a queen of the faeries, with golden hair the color of melted gold and violet eyes like a gem.”

“Furthermore, she behaves with as much majesty as one would expect from the princess of a great empire with three thousand years of history,’ said someone who saw her in wonder.”

Aside from comments on her looks,

“I heard she became sick after seeing His Majesty’s face and barely exchanged any words with His Majesty before retiring to her room.”

“I think this marriage was arranged against Princess Katerina’s will. Wasn’t her face stiff and pale during the welcoming?”

“Perhaps her pride as a princess of the great northern empire wouldn’t forgive being married off to a small and rural country.”

“It seemed she found it unpleasant to speak to His Majesty as well. It could be that, from the standpoint of a princess with high status, she wouldn’t be able to respect His Majesty as her husband since he has the blood of a commoner, though only half.”

Like such, various conjectures are being made regarding the feelings inside the princess’s heart.

These conjectures reached Ludwik’s ear as well, making him feel more and more anxious.

(Was she so cruel because she’s dissatisfied with me after all?)

As Ludwik was beginning to brood over his thoughts again while preparing for the ball—

“It is as Your Highness says. Princess Katerina dislikes Sire, naturally. Why wouldn’t she?”

Adelheid, who had finished adjusting the decorative pocket on Ludwik’s suit, said without hesitation.

“Ehhh, you’re agreeing? That’s usually where you’re supposed to kindly disagree!”

Upon Ludwik retorting reflexively, Adelheid’s ashen eyes brimmed with intelligence. She went on,

“She’s the princess of the great empire that has the most history, is the most developed, and holds the largest amount of territory on the continent. Originally, she should have been able to become the queen of any large nation; yet, the princess came to marry into this small rural country that still believes in oral legends. Even if to us it’s a miraculous stroke of luck, to her, it’s nothing but misfortune. Even if it was the order of her father the emperor, she must be filled with humiliation and anxiety.”

“Makes sense...”

Ludwik had no choice but to nod in agreement to Adelheid’s clear analysis. In

fact, he even began to feel pity for Princess Katerina.

“However, I’m confident that Your Highness is someone who is capable of melting her heart and making her glad she married into Rhodesia, for she was able to fortuitously meet such a wonderful partner.”

“Y-you think so?”

Ludwik scratched his head bashfully.

“Yes, it’ll be fine if it’s Your Highness who has a track record of being ensnared by women from a young girl all the way to an old granny.”

“Like I said that’s not true!”

To Ludwik who was beginning to feel exhausted, Adelheid smiled with a discerning gaze.

“Please have some self-confidence. If Princess Katerina is a radiant beauty akin to the fairy queen who rules the spirit world, then Your Highness is like the legendary knight Albricht who was loved by her. Like him, you are a golden-haired Adonis and kind-hearted, with a healthy body and mind that harbors respect and understanding toward women. The ideal gentleman.”

Adelheid might have been being considerate, as she didn’t say “if looked upon from afar” this time. Still, feeling a little better from her generous praise,

“If you, a woman, assure me like that then I can be brave, Adelheid. I’ll try my best to melt Princess Katerina’s heart.”

Ludwik replied, upon which

“Yes. Also, women who appear as cold and obstinate as her often witness their hate turn into love starting from just a small cue. Once that happens, she’ll be like pudding in Your Highness’s hands.”

Adelheid spoke as if she was reciting a universal truth.

(I see— if a cool, peerless beauty akin to a fairy queen like her melts into pudding it’d be the cutest thing ever. That’d be so nice—. That’s right, since we’re going to be living together as a married couple, I have to do my part to deepen our bond too. It’ll be fine. Every girl has a good side to her, be it an adorable side or a gentle side. I’ll do my best to come to like her by finding that

side of her, and I'll also do my best to have her come to like me as well.)

However, Princess Katerina did not show up to the ballroom even as the time came for the ball to begin.

Rhodesia's high ranking officials began to whisper things like, "What's going on? Is the princess dissatisfied with the marriage after all?" Ludwik was worried.

(She didn't return to Endra, did she?)

Just as Ludwik was worrying in his mind, Princess Katerina's arrival was finally announced.

The double doors engraved with linden trees, the national symbol, open left and right, and in front of everyone appears Princess Katerina wearing a gorgeous ballroom dress.

At the same time, the whispers going around grew into a commotion.

It is because Princess Katerina looks beautiful beyond imagination. Everyone thought, "To think she was this pretty!" as they gazed upon her with eyes of wonder.

Ludwik also found himself in awe at the princess's beautiful features once again. He had thought she was an extraordinary beauty when he faced her this morning in the courtyard of the castle, but she looks even more beautiful and elegant now than she did then.

Her golden hair the color of melted gold shined brilliantly and was done up tied by a lustrous and fine silk ribbon and capped by a jeweled tiara. Her white dress is accented by fur, and both the quality of the cloth itself and the tailoring is on the level of a work of art. The dress fit her willowy form snugly above the waist and expanded as airily as a dream below it.

The spitting image of a fairy queen.

However, just like this morning she still stiffened her cheeks, tied her lips together sharply, and glared at Ludwik with her violet, gem-like eyes.

(I can't falter. First, I'll address her with a smile. Then, I'll invite her to dance with me.)

That's right. If the princess dances, surely her mood will be uplifted as well.

Even a cheerful smile befitting a seventeen year old maiden would arise in the face that currently has “I hate you” written on it.

(Wouldn't it be sublime if such an unparalleled beauty smiles at me?)

While imagining that wonderful sight, Ludwik smiled with his whole face so as to express that he feels happy from the bottom of his heart to have met the princess. He faced towards the person who will become his wife in three days and addressed her refreshingly.

“Shelle draenu Rhodesia el stella rivarnya. (Welcome to Rhodesia. It's an honor to meet you.)”

For just one instant, Princess Katerina widens her eyes. Ludwik was able to perceive a slight waver in the depths of her purple pupils, but that waver froze immediately. Her lips tighten more and more.

Undiscouraged, Ludwik maintained the “smile like a gentle breeze” that he was known for as the Prince of Red Deer Street as he extended his hand towards Princess Katerina.

“Rui else staelya sol rebarno el il felmarta (May I have a dance with you? I love dancing very much.)”

Ludwik had Adelheid check his pronunciation stringently as he practiced by repeating these words over and over again.

For the girl I marry, my only wish is that she likes dancing.

Every girl is endearing and alluring in her own way, but when a girl dances she is ten times lovelier. This is Ludwik's insistence, because whenever he dances with a girl, he always feels in love with her.

His heart springs as he becomes dizzy from happiness.

(So, if Princess Katerina agrees to dance with me, I'm sure that we can become close.)

Princess Katerina's shoulders trembled slightly.

(Eh?)

Gradually, aside from her shoulders, her arms also begin to tremble more and

more intensely.

So as to restrain herself, she grabbed the skirt of her dress tightly with her snowy white hands—

(Is she... feeling nervous?)

If that's the case I have to put her at ease. When Ludwik tried to say something to her in Endrish, words chilling enough to freeze someone flowed out of her light crimson lips.

"I detest dancing."

It was not in Endrish.

It was in Dahl, the language used in Rhodesia, and more than that, her pronunciation was flawlessly accurate to the point that even among natural-born Rhodesian citizens, there's probably not many who could match it. Ludwik was speechless from both the content of her words and the fact that she spoke them in the language of Rhodesia. To Ludwik who remained petrified with his hand extended out to her, the princess again spoke coldly in Dahl that sounded too perfect.

"In particular, coarse folk dances make me want to throw up. The atmosphere here is sickening, so I'll be taking my leave."

She informed. Her dress, hemmed with fur and laces in the pattern of light snowfall, whirled elegantly as she turned around and left the hall.

The princess's attendants that accompanied her from Endra hastily chase after her. Ludwik could see Adelheid furrowing her eyebrows from the corner of his eye.

The hall erupted into an uproar, and Ludwik was left dumbfounded in the center of it all.



"I don't have the confidence to become Princess Katerina's husband, Adelheid."

"Please don't assume a fetal position on the throne, Your Highness. It's ruining your image as a golden-haired Adonis."

“If looked upon from afar, you mean. In the end I’m only a prince on a regional level, a hunk based on context, and a lame country bumpkin if seen up close.”

“The worth of a man is not in his looks. Sire has not only status and power but also youth, does Sire not?”

“It seems to me that in Princess Katerina’s eyes, I’m seen as nothing more than an unsophisticated greenhorn of a weak and minor nation that she can’t even find on a map.”

“We will use Sire’s charm to overturn the situation. There are cases like this in Rhodesian fairy tales as well, such as “The Earl Who Raised Pigs,” in which an earl pretending to be a swineherd toys with a willful princess and “The King with a Pointy Chin,” in which a king pretending to be a vagrant takes a proud princess as his wife and rectifies her personality. Taming a shrew is a man’s romance, Sire.”

“Even if you, a woman, tell me what a man’s romance is... Actually, are you saying that from Princess Katerina’s viewpoint, I’m in the same category as a vagrant? Wouldn’t it be better to have her return to her home country then?

“That’s not possible.”

“Then, postpone the wedding.”

“That is also not possible; we will have Sire and the princess exchange the vows of marriage in the cathedral in two days. Once she’s stuck in marriage, I’m sure even Princess Katerina will resign to fate and become an adorably sweet wife.”

“Don’t say something you don’t mean an ounce of with such a sincere face!”

As the two of them repeated such exchanges, before long the day of the wedding had come.

(Is it really okay to marry her with things as they are?)

One hour before the wedding.

Ludwik was still hesitating. Wearing a white bridegroom outfit, he paced back and forth in the courtyard of the castle.

(Since the night of the ball, I haven't been able to talk to Princess Katerina at all as she had shut herself in her room. Even if it's a political marriage, it's not good to become married like this.)

Princess Katerina is about to finish her preparations as well. She and Ludwik will be moving to the castle cathedral for the ceremony shortly and joining a parade in the town to introduce the new queen afterwards.

"I'll try to talk to Princess Katerina once more before the marriage ceremony begins."

Deciding thus, he walked across the courtyard well illuminated by the sun. It was then.

He heard a rustling sound above his head.

Startled, Ludwik jerked.

(A white bird?)

Something white and frilly traversed through the grove of beautifully pruned trees. It was clearly bigger than a bird.

The sunlight was blindingly bright so Ludwik couldn't see very well, but it looked like it could be a human girl— no way!

Making more rustling sounds while bending twigs, the white shadow jumped into a window of the castle building.

(That's Princess Katerina's room! This is bad!)

In this tranquil and small rural nation, it's hard to think that there is a force that would do something as extreme as sending an assassin to target the bride in order to prevent the king's marriage, but nothing's impossible.

Panicking, Ludwik rushed to Princess Katerina's room in a fluster.

"Is Princess Katerina unharmed? Just now, a suspicious person entered the princess's room through the window—"

As Ludwik informed the Endrish attendant, the attendant immediately turned pale and opened the door to the room.

"Fela fiino (What is the matter?)"

The two of them were met with a cool voice.

Wearing a pure white wedding dress, an unworldly beauty with brilliant golden hair and violet eyes glared at Ludwik severely.

While feeling intimidated by unreal beauty that trumped what he had previously seen from her once again,

(E-eh? There's no one here besides Princess Katerina.)

Ludwik thought flusteredly.

"Pardon me, I saw a suspicious person jump through the trees and infiltrate this room, so I was worried about the princess."

To Ludwik who explained confusedly, the princess informed in a chilly voice.

"Ana polar nai lest. (No one entered the room.)"

Ludwik felt so embarrassed he could die, but he recalled that his original goal was to talk to Princess Katerina before the ceremony.

"Sorry, but could you leave the two of us alone for a little while?"

Ludwik told the attendant.

Princess Katerina made a blatantly annoyed face, but it seems even she couldn't bring herself to tell Ludwik to kindly leave because she's not feeling well when he's right in front of her, so she tied her lips tightly.

The attendant withdrew, and the bride and her groom were left alone with each other.

The princess is turning her face away.

"Umm... Sara eluna faurelina maliege fair toris libera (Sorry for suddenly intruding. I came because I wanted to speak to you before the ceremony, even if only a little.)"

"...We can speak in your language."

"T-thanks. Then umm, though Rhodesia may seem rural and lacking to someone from a great empire like Endra, it has lots of good things too. It's regretful that I can't show you any of them before our wedding, but after the wedding I'll guide you around, so let's tour the country together."

To the princess coldly presenting the side of her face, Ludwik conveys this sincerely.

Even if it wasn't her wish to marry into Rhodesia, Ludwik wants her to know the good parts of Rhodesia if only a little.

"I'd love for you to see the sunset at Lake Mariner and the stars shining on the lake's surface at night. When fall comes, the nearby orchards bear a bunch of fresh apples and grapes, and when winter comes, you can skate on the frozen surface and fish in ice holes for pond smelt. In spring, the streets are littered with ripe blueberries and hawthorns are also in full bloom. The theater that just opened in town is small but lively, always being packed full of spectators. On Sunday, plays based on Rhodesian fairy tales such as *Jean and the Big Bean Vine* and *Snow White and the Seven Faeries* are put on during the daytime for children to enjoy."

Princess Katerina's lips and golden eyelashes fluttered ever so slightly.

"...Fairy tales."

For the first time, Princess Katerina showed signs that she was interested in what Ludwik had to say, so Ludwik injected fervor into his words and pressed the attack.

"Yes. Rhodesia is called the treasure trove of fairy tales you know! A third of Rhodesia is covered by forest, and it is believed that in the forests lie another world where the fantastic characters who appear in fairy tales live. Many legends surrounding that theory remain to this day. Rhodesian children all grow up being taught stories about the forest. We're warned, "Don't go deep into the forest, for strange things happen there." The most famous story related to the forest is about a fairy queen and a journeying knight—"

As if drawn by Ludwik's words, Princess Katerina who has been facing away turns her gaze towards him little by little.

A faint blush appears on her white face, and her cool violet eyes begin to glitter—

Her shoulders shook as if she just became self-aware and her cheeks abruptly stiffened again right after.

“Elle lista moire farest renoreno fariarta kirano ria fasta belo Albricht leah sirna eterna moir lilianda shia fauna colena delera! Rena! (How childish! To think the citizens still believe in fairy tales, it’s just as expected of a small rural country. The educational standard is beyond the pale. Albricht, a dignified and handsome journeying knight with golden hair and emerald eyes, accidentally strayed into another world while wandering about in the forests. A romantic epic about how he meets the queen of the fairy country and spends his days playing with her lovingly in a golden room with seven doors. I could laugh so hard that my belly looks like it’s boiling water. I mean, my stomach! That’s right!”

In response to the raging billow of Endrish assaulting him,

“Eh? Eh?”

Ludwik uttered as he darted his eyes about. Princess Katerina quickly looked away with her eyes and conveyed with a chilly countenance in perfect Dahl.

“Since it seems it isn’t an important matter, may I ask you to leave now? I have things I want to prepare.”

“I’m sorry.”

Feeling like he just had massive amount of cold water dumped on him, Ludwik retreated backwards. As he turned around to leave in a hurry, he incidentally noticed that there were leaves stuck on the hems of Princess Katerina’s wedding dress.

(Eh?)

The princess grabbed the skirt of her dress and pulled it behind her, then glared at Ludwik.

“To ogle the bride before the ceremony, how vulgar. Do kindly take your leave already.”

Being rejected bluntly, Ludwik couldn’t say anything more and left Princess Katerina’s room with doubt in his mind.

(Why did she suddenly start assaulting me with Endrish? I couldn’t understand what she said at all, but for a princess who confined herself in her

room she seemed avid, or rather, like a normal girl who was chatting excitedly with a friend before that. A~ah, but I couldn't become friends with her in the end. If Princess Katerina doesn't want to marry me, I don't want to force her... but after all, I can't say, "Let's cancel the wedding" given the position I'm in either. Will she really grow fond of and open her heart to me after we marry like Adelheid asserted?)

Even after the wedding ceremony began, Princess Katerina did not resign.

Beneath a pure white veil that's finely meshed, the bride continued to tie her lips resolutely, stiffen her cheeks, and look away from Ludwik throughout the ceremony. Whenever Ludwik glanced at her face from the corner of his eye, he felt his stomach hurt.

"Now then, bridegroom, please take the oath."

"Yes, I do."

(Ahh~, I swore just like that~)

Next, it's Princess Katerina's turn to swear.

However, she glued her lips tightly shut like a shellfish and showed no intention of opening her mouth. She furrowed her eyebrows such that they couldn't be furrowed any further and maintained her silence obstinately.

The cathedral was as silent as a graveyard in winter.

As Ludwik felt his heart pounding from anxiety, the archbishop urged the princess on, upon which she cast her eyes downward, bit her lips tightly, and finally,

"...do"

She muttered in a voice as faint as a phantom.

(I'm glad she didn't yell "I don't!" and run away.)

Ludwik felt relieved for the moment, but

"You may now kiss the bride."

As Ludwik drew near her face nervously, she forcefully dodged her head to the side right before their lips were about to touch, causing Ludwik, who had

lost his target, to fall forward slightly from his momentum.

Their cheeks awkwardly brushed against each other.

Before God, I acknowledge that the two of you are now husband and wife.

The archbishop declared pompously, and applause burst forth.

(Eh? I didn't actually kiss her just now, right? Eh? You're going to acknowledge it anyways? Is this really okay?)

Next to Ludwik, who is looking around the crowd restlessly, the bride has her faced turned away.

In the subsequent parade and wedding banquet, Princess Katerina emanated a chilling aura like the northern winds that rage across permafrost. She kept her head turned away from Ludwik the entire time, literally giving him no face at all. The populace who crowded the streets yelled out, "Congratulations on the marriage!"; however, once they saw the irate bride, they too became silent. Then,

"I feel sorry for His Majesty..."

"As expected, the princess is displeased with his commoner background."

"You have my sympathies, Your Highness."

Words of sympathy and condolence like these continued to resound.

The events of this day would later be called "Queen Katerina's Wedding Incident." Ludwik, who ended up having his discord with the new queen revealed to his retainers and the citizenry, wanted to crawl into a hole if there was one.

"Sorry, I can't do this after all."

"Once the marriage is consummated, all women become attached to their husband without exception. If it's Your Highness, everything will be fine. When tomorrow comes, the queen will be all lovey dovey."

"Is it your vice to coolly assert, "It'll be fine" without a single shred of evidence! Adelheid!"

As soon as the banquet ended, Ludwik was made to take a bath and change

into his nightgown, then driven into his bedroom all under Adelheid's instructions.

Thin silk curtains and a canopy covered the expansive bed from all sides, and a feminine silhouette could be seen within.

(It's Princess Katerina!)

"Well then, please have a good night."

Adelheid bowed reverently and left with the attendants.

(Ahhhhhhhhhhh, wait, don't leave us aloneeeee)

Well, it's not like the two of them can play a tournament of cards with everyone on our bed as newlyweds on their first night. Though Ludwik's never had a lover, he of course knows what the groom and the bride are supposed to do on wedding night.

(What am I scared of? It's not like the one waiting for me on the bed is a white wolf; she's a human girl.)

"It's me; I'm coming in."

Ludwik says to her casually. Since he's her husband now, Ludwik thought he shouldn't be overly formal. He parted the silk curtains and entered inside.

Princess Katerina was sitting with her knees touching in a white nightgown, looking like the legendary werewolf who transforms from a beautiful woman into a white wolf when under moonlight. The white wolf looked at him sharply.

Her pointed gaze read, "If you approach me, I'll gnaw off your windpipe."

(Oof.)

Ludwik almost ended up saying, "I'm sorry" and turning around, but

(The white wolf Branshire is a legend; the one here is my wife, a human girl whose canines won't enlarge and nails won't sharpen into claws even if moonlight is shined upon her.)

Ludwik chanted this in his heart and forced a smile out.

"Umm, would you prefer we speak in Endrish?"

“ ... ”

“El faea matalu estelite noa (I’m still not very fluent in Endrish, so), phil altair chestirode (If I say something unintelligible, please tell me.)”

“ ... ”

Ludwik aligns his knees together and straightens his back like Princess Katerina before sitting down on the bed, upon which the princess’s eyebrows became even more downwardly acute.

(A human girl won’t cling on to me with her teeth, won’t bite my flesh off, won’t tear my body into two.)

“El kalis tronidardo torisfea mist dela (I also think that I’m probably still lacking in various ways as your husband myself).”

(I’m being stared at with intense eyes, but I can do this.)

“Chellu toris faruda est vera roos (I don’t plan to skimp on any effort to make you fancy me, so).”

(It feels like I’m being stared at even more intensely now, b-but I’ll be fine.)”

“Elude anaphile chestia (Could you please accept me as your husband?)”

(If I say that it feels like I’m the bride— Rather than that, her face is scary after all. She looks angry— She trembled just now— She’s biting down on her li-ps, and she looks like she’s about to jump me from the way she’s brandishing her nai-ls!!)

Just as Ludwik felt his physical safety in jeopardy—

A transparent drop spilled across the princess’s cheeks which had turned pale.

(Eh?)

As Ludwik opened his eyes wide in shock, drops of tears began to fall from the noble violet eyes of the princess of the north. With her eyes and eyebrows still pointed while biting hard on her lips and gripping the mattress with both hands, tears fell down her face nonstop like a heavy rain.

(W-Wahh! What should I do!)

Having his bride suddenly cry on him on their wedding night, Ludwik’s mind

was scrambling. Moreover, the one crying is the icy princess who's been nothing but cold towards him.

The way she's crying is like that of a little girl, hiccuping now and then as she cries and cries. Seeing her tighten her shoulders and try to keep her eyebrows pointed with all her might, Ludwik felt his heart tighten.

(Ahh I see, she stressed herself a great deal so as not to show me any weakness... to do something like marrying a half commoner from a super rural country three days after meeting him for the first time, she too couldn't help but feel insecure just as any girl in her situation would.)

Ludwik felt a compelling desire to console the crying and trembling princess somehow.

Ludwik has always been weak to women when they're vulnerable or when they're worried about something. If a woman like that is in front of him, he just can't leave her alone and ends up trying to help her. Such is his nature.

And so, discreetly bending his torso toward the crying Princess Katerina,

"Dia toris faeria miste (I won't do anything you don't want me to). Christa royla nieque (So please don't cry)."

Ludwik said wholeheartedly.

Princess Katerina looks up at Ludwik with her disheveled face. Ludwik smiles at her, upon which she distorts her face even more and squeezes her eyes shut. Tears begin to trace her golden eyelashes to their tips before falling without pause again.



With the princess like so, Ludwik spoke about famous spots in Rhodesia and recited the fairy tales of the country to her.

“Did you know that there are various versions of the story about the fairy queen and the knight Albricht? When we tour the country, I’ll take you to the forest which spawned the legend as well. It’s not scary if we don’t go too deep; plus, the greenery is very pretty right now, and the freshly picked blueberries and lingonberries are ambrosial.”

Princess Katerina continued to cry the whole night, and Ludwik continued to

comfort her the entire time, not laying a single finger on her body.

And then, the next morning.

“Morning.”

To Princess Katerina, who had fallen asleep halfway through from crying herself to fatigue, Ludwik gave a tender greeting with his back against the sunlight coming in from the windows.

“!”

As soon as she woke up, she opened her eyes and mouth widely and reddened her face in embarrassment. She quickly turned her face away, jumped off the bed like a bunny, and hid herself behind a screen in the back of the room.

She must be feeling embarrassed from having carelessly cried in front of Ludwik.

Her golden hair that’s brighter than the morning sun was entangled with itself in a mess against the back of her pure white nightgown. Having followed her delicate back with his eyes as she hid herself behind the screen, Ludwik felt his heart thump even harder than it did last night.

(So cute— I thought she was as menacing as a white wolf, but would you look at that, she’s just a normal seventeen year old girl after all. Ever since she came to Rhodesia, our gears have been grinding against each other, but I feel like we can get along from now on.)



As he recalled Princess Katerina’s reddened face, Ludwik slackened his cheeks.

However—

“Ah, princess— I mean, my queen.”

When Ludwik addressed her at the breakfast table, he was shown the side of her face coldly.

While thinking, “Eh?”, he tried to call out to her when she got up to leave the

room, upon which this time she abruptly and quickly distanced herself from him.

Thereafter, whenever Ludwik tried to talk to her, she would stiffen her entire body and walk away briskly.

“It seems that things didn’t go well for His and Her Majesty on their first night.”

“To be disliked so much, I feel sorry for His Majesty.”

He was cast gazes of sympathy from those around him once again.

(I’m sure she just feels embarrassed when we’re in front of others.)

Ludwik tried to reassure himself as he waited for Princess Katerina to pass by the hallway. When she appeared, Ludwik made sure no one else was around this time before he called out to her,

“Hi.”

But, as soon as he spoke, she twitched her elegant shoulders then jumped back lightly, pointed her eyebrows inward like a razor, and made her violet eyes into triangles as she stared at Ludwik. Her two hands, tightly made into fists, were held to her chest.

(S-she’s just embarrassed. She’s staring at me insanely hard, and she’s becoming the white wolf again, but she doesn’t actually hate me right? She won’t come biting onto me, right?)

Even as Ludwik felt his strength waver, he still smiled.

“Elus malta fabio asteria (May I speak to you in your room after dinner?)”

He asked like a gentleman in Endrish, upon which,

“No.”

He was coldly answered clearly and decisively in Dahl words pronounced perfectly. It wasn’t just the words; her eyes were also chilling.

“H-how about tomorrow?”

“No.”

“Then the day after tomorrow.”

“Whether it’s one day or two days or any number of days after tomorrow—no.”

(Hey, I’m your husband you know!)

Princess Katerina focused upon Ludwik with an expression as cold as absolute zero, as if she was the goddess responsible for blizzards.

“Last night, you said that you wouldn’t do anything I don’t want you to.”

“Eh? Ah, right.”

“If that’s the case, please don’t step foot into my room hereafter. Not just at night, but also in the morning and afternoon. And also, please try your hardest not to enter my line of sight. Please don’t address me. Please don’t breathe in front of me.”

“Wai—, Wait a second—”

How are we going to fulfill our duties as a married couple then? Are you going to come to my room? Ludwik wasn’t oblivious nor lionhearted enough to ask such questions.

To Ludwik, whose throat was choked up with words, Princess Katerina, who looked like a graceful fairy queen with her golden hair and violet eyes, uttered as if to throw a stone of glassy ice at him,

“Gradde dela polino (You stink of the countryside, so please don’t come close to me.)”

TN comments

1. Please let me know if there are any blatant errors *i.e.* missing quotes on dialogue.
2. Next chapter is quite long and I’m going to be busier, so I think it’ll take ~2 weeks to do.
3. Hope the hours I spend searching thesauruses and googling to try to preserve as much of the nuance of the original text and making sure the translated text can be easily parsed (improving the readability of the original text not infrequently...) for *every. single. sentence.* shows in the

translation.

4. It's unclear in the original text, but I suspect Ludwik didn't end up sleeping the entire night. Hence why he was up before Katerina and the clause "To Princess Katerina, who had fallen asleep halfway through from crying herself to fatigue." So he watched over her the whole time as she slept.
5. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Taming_of_the_Shrew. Just randomly found out that this novel is partially inspired by this Shakespearean play. You can see which elements were borrowed and rearranged if you read the synopsis there. As a side note, I translated the line "Taming a shrew is a man's romance." without knowing about the play yet back then.
6. I want to hold Katerina's face with my hand.

Chapter 3: The Long Long Long Path to an Heir

And so, without any huge mishaps, a month passed by since the tranquil Kingdom of Rhodesia welcomed the gorgeous princess from the northern empire.

During that time, in the castle—

“The Fried Mullet Incident” (Over the course of twenty minutes, the queen reproached the king for eating a fried mullet from its head.)

“The King’s Red Vest Incident” (The queen laughed scornfully at the king’s new red tunic, comparing it to the crassness typical of a nouveau riche’ dumb son.”

“Lambda’s Necklace Incident” (The queen gave her amethyst necklace, a gift from the king, to her horse Lambda.)

“Kiki’s Red Vest Incident” (The queen gazed at Kiki, her pet white monkey, and said, “Really now, you’re such a dope.” after putting a red vest just like the King’s on her pet.)

And so on. Many small incidents between the king and the queen transpired, and whenever one came up, both inside and outside the castle,

“His Majesty is so pitiful!”

There would be a massive chorus. And young girls would be especially indignant at the queen,

“I can’t believe that cold and cruel queen. Just this morning in the corridors, when His Majesty walked by from the other end, she stared at His Majesty with a face cold enough to start a snowstorm. When the kind His Majesty asked, ‘Morning. How are you feeling?’ with a refreshing smile, she responded, ‘I was feeling fine until just now, but now I don’t feel well.’ with a cold voice!”

“How terrible!”

The maids working at the castle would pause in their cleaning and raise voices of sympathy one after the other.

“Why does Her Majesty treat His Majesty so coldly? Even though His Majesty is so wonderful.”

“I know. His Majesty’s golden hair and green eyes are dreamy and his personality is bright and kind as well. Even though His Majesty is the ideal husband.”

“I bet she thinks that a half-commoner man doesn’t even count as human when compared to her high blood as the daughter of an emperor. Don’t act like you’re all that when you’ve never even peeled an egg yourself!”

“Even though if I was His Majesty’s wife, I would cherish His Majesty.”

“Me too. I’d never be sarcastic nor would I glare at His Majesty. I would kindly listen to what His Majesty has to say, offer him my knees to rest his head on, peel an apple then feed it to His Majesty’s mouth... I want to become His Majesty’s sanctuary—”

“Me too—!”

Mixed among the maids was a tall girl wearing a knight’s uniform feeling fidgety. Her long black hair was tied into a single bun atop her head and she had a crisp and earnest-looking face. She is the female knight Evelyn. Due to her gallant looks and caring personality, she was relied upon by the maids. Since King Ludwik took the throne, she’s mixed in with the maids’ chitchat even more often than before.

Even so, she doesn’t proactively join in on the conversations. Rather, she simply listens in on “The Latest News on King Ludwik” that the maids share and secretly resented the queen’s cold attitude.

Evelyn reveres King Ludwik as a god.

During the coronation parade, Evelyn was managing the crowd of spectators when she fell from her horse. Of all things, she rolled over in front of His Majesty’s carriage disgracefully and was about to die from the shame and pity

when His Majesty personally got off the carriage and approached her, asking

—Are you okay? Did you hurt yourself somewhere?

gently as His Majesty looked upon her with refreshing green eyes.

Since then, to Evelyn who swore absolute devotion to King Ludwik, seeing His Majesty abused by the queen vexed her so much it was like her stomach was being eaten away.

(If— just if, I was His Majesty's lover)

Being dragged along by the maids' delusions, Evelyn felt her cheeks burn as she opened her eyes wide and inflated her cheeks.

(W-what am I thinking. My duty is to serve the king as a knight beyond the question of gender. To begin with, for someone like me whose family just recently gained influence, the difference in status between me and His Majesty is— but, compared to that treacherous queen I can better understand and console His Majesty... No, I mustn't think such insolent thoughts—.)

Evelyn's face got hotter and hotter and her heart beat stronger and faster, to the point where it felt like others would be able to hear it.

"I-I-I-I-I-It's about time for me to return to the order of knights."

She left the maids' gathering.

On the other hand, at the salon where the daughters of noblemen gather to mingle—

"It's only a matter of time before Her Majesty returns home."

Therese, the eldest daughter of the Falma Family, one of the Three Grand Duchies of Rhodesia, sat on a soft sofa as she opened a feathered fan in front of her shallow breasts and glowed in satisfaction.

Therese, who had her ruby-red hair curled floridly, was raised to become the queen.

Her nose is elegant and tall, her lips full and pompous, her waist slim and slender. Only her breasts were a bit flat and lonely, but to Therese who habitually states that women with big breasts are vulgar and vapid, it wasn't a

problem at all.

That my breasts are somewhat small isn't even worth troubling myself over when I have such high blood and am this beautiful and exceedingly refined.

That's right. I don't lose even when compared to the queen.

"As expected, a bride from a foreign country both thinks and behaves differently, so there's bound to be a clash. I feel so sorry for His Majesty."

She said in an affected show of sympathy, but the shape of her mouth was completely loose.

"It's just as you say Miss Therese—."

Therese's groupies, fellow daughters from noble families, agree with her.

"The one befitting His Majesty who was born and raised in Rhodesia is Miss Therese, a fellow Rhodesian who hails from a nationally famous family."

"If Princess Katerina divorces His Majesty and returns to Endra, the next queen is bound to be Miss Therese."

Therese slackened the area around her mouth and on the surface warned "You're jumping ahead of yourselves.", but inside her heart she was already visualizing the wedding program.

(It must be grander than Queen Katerina's ceremony. The cathedral in which Queen Katerina and His Majesty held their ceremony is ominous, so we'll do it in a church connected to my family. As for the season, spring would be good. The petals of bluebell flowers shall cover the floor generously. Oh my, the spring of next year is just the blink of an eye away.)

I wonder if I should start moving things forward now. As Therese thought it over, she picked up an apple tart and put it in her mouth, narrowing her eyes at the refreshing taste.

"Ahh, it's completely autumn now isn't it?"

Meanwhile, the king's close aide Adelheid made a grimace with her elegant face.

"Things are excee—dingly bad."

As soon as she entered the king's office, she entered into lecture mode against Ludwik.

"At this point, everyone in the country is aware of the discord between Your Highness and Her Majesty. The young maidens working inside the castle are clamoring that they want to be Sire's lover in Her Majesty's stead. It's only been a month since the marriage, but there are already rumors that the divorce is only a matter of time, which are making the citizens feel anxious."

Ludwik put his hand against his temples as if he were enduring a headache as he sat on his office chair.

"If the two of you don't get along, it will increase the strength of Duke Walter's faction. In particular, the influence of the merchant Elmond has been rising rapidly recently. He's spent a lot of money in contributions to Duke Walter. It's becoming a problem."

In short, from a political standpoint as well, Ludwik and Queen Katerina must achieve a harmonious relationship.

"I doubt the Endrish Emperor, who gifted to our country his precious daughter, would be pleased to learn that the princess is being slighted."

"I know, Adelheid. Even I'm doing my best as well, like the hero of antiquity who forced the giants to retreat to the spirit world in the forest. But, I'm on the verge of death after having my heart smashed over and over again by the mace with thorns of ice that the king of giants, Barbaros, wields."

"In other words, Sire is saying that Sire still hasn't properly become husband and wife with Her Majesty, right?"

Ludwik sighed in response to Adelheid's point.

"How are we supposed to become husband and wife when she won't even let me enter her room? Are you going to tell me to consummate the marriage forcefully in the courtyard in broad daylight? If I tried that I think I'd be stabbed with the ancestral sword she secretly brought along with her. Moreover, rumors that the Rhodesian king isn't just a country bumpkin but even a rapist would spread you know."

Ludwik had expected that they could become a happy couple with time after

the episode where he comforted the queen on their wedding night and she became beet red when she woke up the next day.

But then he was banned from entering her room, glared at with chilling eyes at every turn, and slighted in both overly perfect Dahl and cold Endrish. The wall of ice surrounding the queen continues to become taller and thicker day by day.

On rare occasions, Queen Katerina would glance towards him for just a moment with upturned eyes as if worried that she went too far. When that happened,

(This person is just awkward isn't she. She's actually a gentle and delicate girl underneath it all.)

Ludwik would make wishful interpretations again like this, but then Queen Katerina would immediately turn her head to the side even more sharply than usual.

“Corell dela polesé (This is why I hate bumpkins.)”

She would say with a cold voice, turning his hopes to dust.

(I don't want to say bad things about the person who became my wife, but could it be that Queen Katerina has a **bad personality**? Isn't that why she remained an unsold leftover until the age of seventeen despite being the princess of a great empire?)

Ludwik suspects that this is what Adelheid was going to mention about the princess that time before the wedding when she started to say something only to stop herself and change the subject.

That the princess has a problematic personality—.

“In any case, so long as she continues to hate me as a bumpkin that was raised as a commoner, things won't improve regardless of how hard I try.”

“As one who serves Sire, I find that exceedingly vexing. Even though Sire is a gentleman whom one can't find fault with whether it be personality or looks—”

Adelheid gently narrows her eyes.

“However, if we don't immediately turn things around, girls who aspire to be Sire's lover might sneak into Sire's room. The other day, I received a report that

a silhouette seeming to belong to that of a young girl was climbing a tree in the courtyard at night from a soldier on guard.”

“S-something like that happened?...!”

As Ludwik tightened his voice, that he witnessed a suspicious person trespass into the queen’s room from a tree branch through the window crossed the corner of his mind, but he is pulled back by Adelheid’s words.

“As such, how about we start by having Her Majesty understand Sire’s charm points?”



The next day, in the afternoon.

“.....”

“.....”

On top of the terrace illuminated by the gentle autumn sunlight, Ludwik and Queen Katerina sat facing each other.

Each had a sketchbook on top of one’s knees. The one who prepared this is Adelheid.

“Starting now, I’d like to have the two of Your Highnesses draw each other’s portrait.”

She announces with a nice and cool voice.

Your Highnesses need to spend some time together as a couple. Accordingly, how does cultivating a shared hobby sound? His Majesty is very talented at drawing. I’m sure His Majesty can depict Madam’s beauty fully without losing a single detail.

—Women’s hearts flutter when they learn of talents men have that they didn’t expect. If Sire can make an appeal of Sire’s artistic cultivation, I think Her Majesty’s impression of Sire as an uneducated bumpkin will change as well.

Adelheid had said that to him.

(It’s true that I’m good at drawing portraits of women.)

That Ludwik was a sensation for drawing female customers dressed up in his

sketchbook during his time serving customers in the castle town must not have escaped Ludwik's capable grand chamberlain.

The girls would gaze at Ludwik, who ran his colored pencils across his sketchbook, with glittering eyes, and when he showed them the finished sketch their eyes and cheeks would light up even more.

Ludwik's dream was to make Rhodesia into a country filled with beautiful women by picking out clothes that pull out the girls' glamor.

(If I were to pick out clothes for the queen... I would capitalize on her elegant and slender figure with a simple top— one that would fit her torso and arms snugly... the collar would have a bit of height, and the chest area would be open to the extent just before it becomes coarse. In contract, from the waist down it would be fluffy... Oh yeah, I should layer several transparent cloths on top of each other and shape them like flower petals. As for the color... it would have to be white after all. It would help bring out the beauty of her violet eyes and golden hair. Her hair would be done up in a sidetail and the ends curled lavishly... a pearl barrette would compliment her hair nicely.)

To begin with she's as beautiful as a fairy queen, so there's plenty of worth in dressing her up. The image in Ludwik's mind steadily becomes clearer and more detailed.

Ahh, the queen truly is beautiful.

I want to make her prettier and prettier. I want to help her shine as a woman.

Halfway through, Ludwik became engrossed in his work and moved his hand about as he cycled through the colored pencil in use one after the other.

At first, Princess Katerina frowned as though she felt ill at ease, but seeing Ludwik run myriad colored pencils across his sketchbook, her expression turned to that of curiosity as she glanced over here and there.

"It's complete."

Ludwik relaxes his shoulders and reveals his sketch of Queen Katerina wearing an elegant white dress, upon which

"How beautiful! It's the spitting image of a fairy queen wearing a dress made

of light.”

Adelheid lauded in a loud voice. Queen Katerina’s cheeks flushed red as a look of entrancement surfaced on her violet eyes.

(It seems she’s taken with the sketch.)

As Ludwik unconsciously slackened his cheeks, his eyes met with hers, upon which she displayed a countenance of sudden realization. She lowered her eyes and bit her tongue as if weakened, after which she abruptly pouted her lips and raised her eyebrows as she began to sketch Ludwik’s face with a fearsome force.

(mm...? Her strokes seem to be rather violent though. I wonder what her sketch of me looks like... How do I look in her eyes? Even if I don’t look like an Adonis to her, I’d be happy if she draws me with a pleasant face.)

Curious, Ludwik casually rises slightly from the bench and pushes his hands against the table as he leans forward and peeks at where Queen Katerina’s hands are.

Upon which—

(T-this is supposed to be me!?)

What was drawn is a fiendish man with eyes slant to the point of caricature and his mouth wide open like a roaring beast.

“My face doesn’t look like that!”

It was so mean that Ludwik couldn’t help but protest, upon which Queen Katerina answered flatly,

“I only drew what I see.”

You’re saying this is what you see? While absorbing the shock, Ludwik protests further.

“My eyebrows aren’t so bushy, and aren’t the eyes too slanted? Besides, what’s with the fire coming out of my mouth? And this head that’s twice the size of the body makes no sense considering the human form, and this face is impossible for a human as well.”

“Have you never looked in a mirror before? This is what your face looks like.”

“I don’t spew fire from my mouth.”

“The ugliness of your heart is embodied on your face.”

“Are you saying my true character is that of a fire breathing monster?”

As the mood soured, Adelheid cut in.

“Are Your Highnesses thirsty? I’ve prepared some tea expressly imported from the East, so please take a break and enjoy it.”

Queen Katerina turned to the side in a huff.

With an awkward air between the two as usual, they pick up their respective tea cups and drink the tea. Ludwik thought the taste is rather peculiar; it’s awfully sweet with a bitter aftertaste. Queen Katerina is furrowing her eyebrows as well.

“How is it?”

Adelheid asks in a nice and cool manner.

“It has a very complex taste doesn’t it?”

“.....”

“In that case, please drink some more.”

Adelheid fills her cup a second time.

Queen Katerina cringed her face as she drank three full cups of the tea. Perhaps she doesn’t dislike the taste despite her expression after all?

(I can’t believe she can drink something this nasty—...)

As Ludwik gazed at Queen Katerina, her neck suddenly dropped violently to one side.

She manages to lift her head back up, but her head begins to sway again.

She put her right hand to her forehead looking ill.

On the other hand, Ludwik also began to feel somewhat fuzzy within his chest. Furthermore, his head began to feel hazy as if lost in a mist.

(What's wrong with me. My body feels hot suddenly.)

Queen Katerina looks like she's in pain, squeezing her eyebrows together and opening her mouth slightly. Her expression appears quite erotic to Ludwik, making his heart jump in alarm.

(W-what is this! Why is seeing the queen suddenly making my heart flutter?)

Though he was sullen from having been drawn like the atrocious criminal in a wanted poster just before, to feel his heart pitter-patter for her like this now is abnormal.

However, seeing Queen Katerina's pant slightly while her white cheeks gradually redden into a blush, Ludwik feels his heart start to beat even more tempestuously.

"Oh my, Madam. What's the matter?"

Adelheid asks, upon which Queen Katerina murmurs in a hoarse voice,

"Haree... Zlocia (I suddenly... feel ill)."

Perceiving sensuality in her frail voice, Ludwik feels even more and more flurried, upon which

"That's not good. Well then, Sire, please escort Madam to her room."

"Why don't you call a maid? Besides, I also feel ill..."

The fuzziness in his chest and the dizziness in his head intensifies, along with which the queen also became more and more bewitching.

"Is that so? Then before Sire feels any worse, Sire must escort Madam to her room as her husband."

Adelheid advises persistently.

Ludwik felt ill enough that he didn't have the energy to defy Adelheid, and also considering that Queen Katerina does seem to be in very bad shape, he stayed silent without complaining.

"Now then, Sire."

Urged by Adelheid, Ludwik ended up taking Queen Katerina to her room.

The distance from the courtyard terrace to Queen Katerina's room is short, but as both of their strides are staggering, if they don't support each other they'll end up falling over.

"D...Don't touch me, please."

"But if I don't support you, you'll collapse."

"I can walk by myself."

"Look at how you're staggering."

"That's you."

As the two repeat such exchanges, they arrive in front of her room.

Though he received a perpetual ban from entering her room,

"It's an emergency so I'm entering."

He opens the door without waiting for a reply.

Perhaps feeling too bothered to speak, Queen Katerina doesn't say anything. On the contrary, she's grasping tightly onto Ludwik's clothes and leaning against him.

Just now, Ludwik incidentally realized that this was the first time he touched her body.

The wedding kiss was a miss due to her dodging her head to the side. Their wedding night consisted of the queen crying on the bed and Ludwik saying, "Don't worry, I won't do anything." and eagerly comforting her until she ended up falling asleep from fatigue, after which he pulled the comforter over her body and gazed at her face made wet by tears.

Having a girl who until then had glared at him with eyes full of caution look so fragile with her eyes closed, Ludwik felt his heart skip a beat and thought that he wanted to protect her. He thought that when she wakes up, he ought to greet her, eat a warm breakfast with her, and discuss how they want their married life to be together.

Ludwik believed that things would definitely go well.

He had experienced with his beautiful new wife a wedding night that felt

tranquil, yet awfully bittersweet and ticklish to the heart.

Things didn't go as expected though...

(I wonder if our relationship would be different now if I had redone the wedding kiss properly and consummated our marriage on the wedding night without saying something naive like "I won't do anything.")

Ludwik thought about such things with his wavering mind.

It might be because he could see Queen Katerina, who is grasping tightly onto his shirttail with her slender fingers, as a fragile girl who needs to be protected, just like that night.

Ludwik tried to lower her into a sitting position onto her bed, upon which

"Le...lera nois (I...I'm fine now.)"

She brushed his hand aside with a red face; at that moment, her dainty feet stumbled and collided with Ludwik's ankles, causing their feet to entangle with one another as they collapsed onto the bed.

"Wah!"

Ludwik's hands thrust deeply into the comforter stuffed with geese feather, and he breathed in her elegant and lightly sweet fragrance from right under his nose.

Underneath his body, there is something frighteningly soft and delicate.

Upon realizing that that something is Queen Katerina's dainty body, that he's right on top of that same body, and seeing her face partly covered by her frayed and disordered hair, Ludwik's heart jumped so hard he felt like it would fly out of his mouth.

(I-I have to get up quickly!)

Ludwik tries to get up, but his body refuses to listen.

Ludwik feels his head become hotter and hotter, his pulse elevate, and her sweeeeet fragrance occupy both of his nostrils entirely. He can't help but want to continue embracing her slender body, enjoying the feel of her hair that's like silk thread, and breathing in her wonderful fragrance.

(Now that I think about it, we're a newlywed couple, so there's no need for me to get up.)

Whether it's her small face or her slender throat, all of her skin is frosted white and almost transparent. Her lips are pink like flower petals, and her violet eyes are like a gem made of solidified drops of violet extract.

Really, she's a beautiful princess just like a dream.

Ludwik slid his arms around her back and embraced her tightly.

Queen Katerina's body quivered frailly. Even her frightened gesture stirred his heart as well.

She raised some sort of complaint in Endrish.

"Sulaea dol."

Her voice was tiny and weak. She's probably flustered.

—I'm scared... Please be gentle.

His mind converted what she said conveniently like so, making his already burning head flare in heat.

"Nei."

Ludwik, who hugged Queen Katerina tightly against himself, felt his earlobes tickled by her ephemeral breaths.

(Nei. That means no, right...?)

—You can't.

"Nei, silberrida solyun daryu heito nei."

—No, you can't. It's still daytime and you're already— do stop. Ahh, really, you caan't.

It'd be difficult for one to consider her feeble gestures, which consisted of clumsily shuffling her narrow shoulders and slender arms about, as a serious sign of protest, the sight of which absolutely numbed Ludwik's brain.

The queen pushed back against Ludwik's chest frailly and squeezed out,

"...Y-You're... heavy."

in Dahl with a strained voice.

In response, Ludwik finally raised his body up a little, upon which her face, dyed deeply red, appeared right beneath his line of sight.

She looks up at Ludwik with her glistening violet eyes, and her small, lightly parted lips are trembling like a maiden awaiting a kiss from her lover.

Her sweetness caused his chest to tighten.

(Is this really, that queen? Not someone else?)

Queen Katerina wouldn't make such an inviting expression. She would surely glare at Ludwik with a frosty gaze. Yet, right now she's looking up at Ludwik with completely flustered eyes while nervously stiffening her body that's touching him in innocence.

"W-what do you plan to do..."

There was no sense of composure in her tone, and the way the last syllable of her sentence quivered was irresistibly sweet.

Ludwik also muttered hoarsely,

"Really... I wonder what's going on—"

What's the matter with me?

To think I'd want to tightly embrace the queen and become one with her.

"I deeply regret saying I wouldn't do anything to you."

Ludwik muttered painfully, upon which the queen's narrow shoulders and long golden eyelashes trembled, and her expression increasingly fanned the flames of desire as it became frailer and frailer.

"I want to revoke that promise."

Queen Katernia trembles as her breath is taken away.

Ludwik looks down upon her glistening violet eyes and conveys seriously,

"Isn't it fine for us to become real husband and wife by now?"

Queen Katerina's eyes opened widely again. While thinking that her face, which seems flustered and bewildered, is awfully adorable, Ludwik feels his

head spin as he approaches her slightly parted lips with his so as to fulfill the kiss to seal their vows that he failed to attain at the wedding ceremony.

She doesn't resist.

With her beet red face which was lost in chaos, she continues looking up at Ludwik without moving.

If anything, she looks like she's waiting for Ludwik to kiss her.

(We can finally become true husband and wife.)

As Ludwik's lips are about to touch her pure, pink lips—

“I-I! I've gotta read the Scriptures!”

(Hahh?)

Ludwik stopped and stared at her blankly, confused.

(Scriptures?)

For a moment, he thought that Queen Katerina blurted out something in Endrish. That's how confused he was.

(Wait, did she say *watashi* [I, casual] instead of *watakushi* [I, polite] just now? And also, she said “gotta” instead of “have to” like a townsgirl would.)

As Ludwik was befuddled, Queen Katerina pushed against Ludwik's shoulders and lifted his body up from hers in one jerk, crawling out from underneath him. She quickly clutched her elegantly bound Book of Scriptures that lay on the side of her bed.

She hastily brings it with her to the window and really begins to read. Out loud even.

“Helma frodia anastern toris kalia slei slei raeyarl (All creation is God's gift to us. God's love covers the entire world.”

It's said that the world's first Book of Scriptures was written in Endrish.

Thus, even churches in Rhodesia recite in Endrish for the important ceremonies. What Queen Katerina is reading aloud is a famous verse.

The citizens of the Endrish Empire are said to be fervently religious, taking

pride in being the land where faith originated. But, why does she have to read it now of all times?

“Is that... something you have to do right now?”

With her back still facing Ludwik, Queen Katerina spoke politely this time in flawless Dahl.

“I always read the Scriptures before I go to bed.”

Who made that rule and where?

“El faral lukia saldarnya cresta bellu (Improperious desire is poison that distances us from God; be wise and eliminate it.)”

“It’s still noon though.”

“Whether it’s nighttime or noon, I’ve gotta read the Scriptures before going to bed!”

Ah, she’s speaking like a townsgirl again.

“Soma haryll trista (Be gone, obscene evil spirit.)”

(What the, isn’t that a verse for exorcism?)

Ludwik gets off the bed with a frown on his face and walks towards Queen Katerina.

The unbearable throbbing that scorched his body just before was completely lost. Ludwik couldn’t even be bothered to care anymore. Having the Scripture recited before him right before the act, is there any man that wouldn’t wilt?

If she’s reading the Scriptures loudly so that people in the hall can hear her, Ludwik wanted to let her know that she needn’t worry about him doing anything anymore, so how about she closes her Holy Book? Standing right behind her, he spoke.

“Hey—”

Upon which, Queen Katerina suddenly turned around.

She hooked the outer ends of her eyebrows upward, made her eyes into triangles, and her face was as ferocious as the white wolf itself.

At the same time, she raised her hand high and slammed the Holy Book's spine down against Ludwik's forehead.

"Trista Delura—! (Vanish, evil spirit!)"

She screeched as she completed the arc of her swing with all her strength.

Having received a holy strike to his forehead from a diagonal direction, Ludwik was blown to the side, hitting his head on the corner of a cabinet.

"Gue!"

Ludwik groaned like the frog that was slapped onto the wall when it tried to sneak into the bed of a princess in a certain fairy tale and collapsed onto the floor facing upward.

In his field of vision, he sees Queen Katerina panting roughly while tightly gripping the Holy Book with one hand.

Her golden hair the color of melted gold was completely unraveled, falling onto her slender shoulders dispersedly, and her white cheeks were stained rose red.

However, no matter how beautiful she is, she only looks like a fanatic nun who preys on innocent people under the pretense of an exorcism to Ludwik.

As his consciousness receded, Ludwik learned that the Holy Book can be a weapon and that he mustn't carelessly make a move on the queen.



And thus, a new incident named "Bam! The Queen's Holy Book Incident" was added to the record of the strife between the King and Queen of Rhodesia.

"They say His Majesty was knocked down by the queen with a Holy Book!"

"I heard the queen shouted, "Vanish, evil spirit!" to His Majesty!"

"Even though His Majesty earnestly escorted Queen Katerina to her room after she became ill from drinking too much black tea, Her Majesty suddenly snapped, saying 'Please don't touch me with your foul hands.'"

"How horrible. That must be how His Majesty got a bruise on His forehead.

"Good grief, to be treated like an evil spirit the moment one is alone with his

wife in the bedroom is intolerable for a man.”

“No kidding. Being the princess daughter of the holy emperor, it can’t be helped that she’s haughty, but there’s a limit to all things.”

“I’m so glad that my wife is the daughter of a farmer.”

“Yeah, the daughter of an emperor isn’t someone to take as your wife.”

Like so, voices of sympathy once again rose further about throughout the castle.

The next day. As Ludwik sat in his office chair patting his forehead which had turned blue, Adelheid said regretfully,

“The aphrodisiac that I slipped in the tea was professed to be strong enough to cause a man and a woman uninterested in each other to lose themselves in burning passion the moment their eyes meet, but it seems three cups wasn’t enough for Queen Katerina. I should have had her drink two or three more cups.”

“Adelheid, you made us drink something like that!?”

Ludwik peeled his eyes wide open.

(No wonder I suddenly felt so aroused after I drank the tea. That Queen Katerina looked so sensual, that I felt flurried just looking at her, and that I embraced her after I fell down onto the bed on top of her must have all been the aphrodisiac’s fault.)

Incidentally, when Ludwik looked up what the queen first muttered when he fumbled on top of her, he learned that it meant, “Please stop, if you don’t cease this base behavior immediately, divine punishment will be handed down.”

After that incident, when their eyes inadvertently cross in the dining hall, the queen would glare at Ludwik like the white wolf and cover her entire body in an armor of ice.

She seems to have become extra wary after Ludwik’s encroachment onto her. Her fiercely angry countenance telegraphed, “Don’t come any closer to me, don’t address me, you brute!”

Their relationship as husband and wife became even dicier than before.

“I’m deeply sorry. Next time I’ll have Her Majesty drink at least six cups.”

“Give me a break already. That’ll only escalate her fanatic exorcism and make her call all Rhodesians evil spirits before long you know.”

In the first place, trying to get a couple to consummate their marriage with drugs isn’t something a young woman would normally come up with. (Well, I’ve never asked Adelheid how old she is, so maybe she isn’t young actually.)

As the lump made on his forehead began to throb painfully—

Ludwik was informed he had a guest.

Upon arriving at his private chamber,

“Big Brother! It’s been awhile.”

The young girl wearing a dress that only reached above her knees stood up from the sofa, and her evenly trimmed flaxen hair rustled about back and forth as she ran towards Ludwik and clung onto him.

She’s Ludwik’s stepsister Lottie.

“Hi Lottie. You did well to make it here. How’s the store? Are Father and Martin the same as usual?”

Martin is Ludwik’s kind and docile half brother born between Ludwik’s stepfather and his mother who just turned four. As Ludwik reciprocated Lottie’s hug, Lottie looked up at him with wide and round eyes.

“Yeah, everyone’s doing well. Though the store lost its poster boy, I’m doing my best as its poster girl so you don’t need to worry. Tourist customers who come to visit the store that the king used to work at when he was a commoner have come in such waves that it’s even busier than before.”

She answered Ludwik.

When their parents married, Lottie was still just a baby who just began to toddle. She became very attached to Ludwik, so much so that the first word she learned to say wasn’t Mommy or Daddy but “Bi Broda”.

She would always follow Ludwik around.

“I wanna be with Bi Broda.”

She'd want to do everything with Ludwik and imitate his behavior, so Ludwik came to pay attention to his language and his table manners. Since if he said something uncouth or ate in a coarse manner, it would pass on to Lottie.

That Lottie calls herself *boku* [I, masc.] was also an imitation of Ludwik.

"Lottie, you're a girl so you have to say *watashi* [I, fem.] not *boku*."

He tried to correct her many times, but she just wouldn't change. Even now, Lottie still continues to call herself *boku* with a bright and lovable voice like that of a small bird.

Even now that Ludwik has become king, she came here to visit him with the same smile as before.

Today she's wearing an airy knee-length dress, a headdress with a large side-ribbon, and socks that are almost knee-high. All of them were designed by Ludwik.

Lottie asked innocently as soon as she sat down next to Ludwik on the sofa. She assumed a diminutive posture, with her knees touching and her hands on her knees.

"Big Brother, I heard when you tried to get intimate with Her Majesty during midday you were struck with a Holy Book and fainted?"

"W-whom did you hear that from!"

(Don't tell me the rumor has already made its way around town?)

To Ludwik who became flustered, Lottie replied nonchalantly,

"The maids in the hallway were chatting about it as I waited for you. Also, the guards who escorted me to this room were also talking about it. It seems it's become a hot topic?"

Ludwik dropped his shoulders dejectedly.

(Isn't it questionable to gossip about your king so much all around the castle? Isn't there something fundamentally wrong with that?)

"Ah, but, everyone sympathized with Big Brother. They said things like, 'I feel so sorry for His Majesty. If it was me that His Majesty came desiring, I'd gladly

entertain his request. I'd be okay with Holy Book play and evil spirit play too, yet—."

"Wahhhhhhhh."

Ludwik yelled as he reflexively covered both of Lottie's ears.

(These things are still too early for Lottie whose breasts have finally just begun to swell slightly. In the first place, Holy Book play? Evil spirit play? I know nothing about that either!")

Ludwik gently removed his hands from Lottie, whose eyes were wide in surprise. He then brought his face near hers, and as one would instruct a child,

"You see, Lottie. I didn't really commit any misconduct towards the queen. I only approached her as the king."

He states, distorting the truth to somewhat. In response, Lottie smiles sweetly.

"I see— it's tough being the king isn't it—. There, there."

She reached out with her hand and petted the lump on Ludwik's forehead.

(Ah, having family around is so nice...)

As Ludwik's heart, which had been on edge due to Queen Katerina, begins to unravel tenderly, it becomes filled with kindness.

"Guess what, Big Brother? Martin can read books now. He's engrossed in thick and bulky books. Father boasted proudly that his great-great-grandfather had aimed to be a scholar, so he must be whom Martin inherited his intellect from. He bought books packed with words that would normally be considered too difficult for children to read. But, it seems that Martin's reading those books little by little as well."

"I see, I'll send some books as a gift next time too."

"Yeah, Martin would definitely like that. I had actually wanted to bring Martin along today. I figure Martin, being as docile as he is, wouldn't cause any trouble in the castle. But, it seems he's a little afraid of going somewhere he's never been to before without Father. And Father... he said he'd feel nervous in a castle, so—"

Ludwik hasn't met his stepfather since the one time he brought Lottie and Martin along to the castle for the wedding ceremony.

"It'd be nice if I could visit home, but..."

Ludwik's heart, which had become filled with cheer from talking to Lottie, deflated in the blink of an eye, and he felt lonely as though his body became empty inside.

If he told Adelheid he wants to visit his home, she might let him. However, if he returns with knights and the extravagantly decorated royal carriage, he would inconvenience his family with a great deal of public attention.

Seeing Ludwik make a gloomy face, Lottie clasped Ludwik's hand together snugly with her childish hands and said brightly,

"You know, I came to plead for something from Big Brother today."

"What is it?"

Upon Ludwik asking, Lottie opened her boyishly vigorous eyes wide as she turned her eyes upward towards Ludwik.

"Yeah. The dress that Big Brother designed for me has become too small, so I thought I'd like a new dress—"

"I see. You're in your growth period after all."

"Yup yup, I'm steadily growing bigger every night. When I wake up every morning it feels like I've gotten taller."

"I'll make a dress on the baggy side for you to grow into then. Let's take your measurements."

"You'll make one for me? Aren't you busy with work as the king?"

Lottie inquired a little concernedly, upon which Ludwik rustled her hair as he patted her head.

"It's fine. It just so happens that I just finished approving a set of official documents. Besides, even if I am busy, I wouldn't decline to make clothes for you, Lottie. You're my exclusive model after all."

Lottie's cheeks slacken into bliss like a puppy.

“Hooray! I love you, Big Brother.”

She clings onto Ludwik while remaining seated on the sofa, rubbing her slackened cheeks against the side of Ludwik’s neck. The sweet scent of wild grass grazed past Ludwik’s nostrils, and her rustling flaxen hair stroked Ludwik’s neck.

Even if she’s grown taller, she’s still like a child in this way.

“It’s ticklish, Lottie.”

While smiling, Ludwik gently frees himself from Lottie’s arms and prepares a tape measure.

For Ludwik, taking Lottie’s measurements and making her clothes are routine activities. With each change of the season, he enjoyed imagining what clothes he wants to have Lottie wear next. Also, there isn’t any girl who can bring out the appeal of Ludwik’s somewhat eccentric designs better than Lottie.

Upon seeing sketches of Ludwik’s original designs, most girls would react like this:

“Well it’s cute... but I think it shows too much leg...”

Or,

“I think it’s a liiittle bit too bold for me... and my legs would get cold. Sorry, I’d rather have a dress with a normal length.”

And beyond simple hesitation,

“Ludy, could it be you have a leg fetish? Or is it that you get off from making girls wear embarrassing clothes?”

Girls would be taken aback from Ludwik’s original designs, but there was an exception.

“Big Brother’s dresses are the best for me!”

Only Lottie would happily wear his dresses; her appreciation made Ludwik happy as well.

“Now then, let’s see how much you’ve grown in half a year.”

Ludwik knelt down in front of Lottie who was in celebration mode and his

face naturally came close to her body as he wound the tape measure around her slender waist from behind.

“Yeah, you really have grown. You’re right; the size I’ve used for you until now would probably feel uncomfortably tight.”

Ludwik slackened his cheeks, upon which,

“Geeez, I don’t need my waist to grow bigger.”

Displeased, Lottie puffs her cheeks and twists to the side.

“The part that grew lies above my waist.”

“Sure, sure.”

Amused, Ludwik let out a giggle as he moved the tape measure up from her waist.

Ludwik first measures the circumference underneath the breasts then the one around them. Lottie squirmed several times and let out cute chirpy laughs like a little bird.

“Hey now, if you don’t stay still, I can’t measure properly you know.”

“I can’t help iiit.”

She said in a spoiled tone.

“So, how is it Big Brother? Did my breasts grow?”

“Yeah, they’re plumper than when I measured them in spring.”

“See?”

Since Lottie looked down at him with a delighted face, Ludwik reciprocated, looking up at her and smiling with his hands still clinching together the tape measure wound around her breasts. It was then—

A hesitant knock sounded from the door.

(I wonder who it is?)

Before he could answer the knock,

“Kii!”

He heard an animal's chirp as the door opened with a clank.

A small white monkey with a long and thin tail is hanging from the doorknob.

It seems the one who opened the door is this monkey. The adorable monkey with round eyes was called "Kiki" and was Queen Katerina's pet that she brought with her from Endra. Normally he's kept in the glasshouse in the courtyard, but being unusually clever, he often escapes outside by opening the lock himself, to the point that the lock has had to be replaced over and over again.

Incidentally, the red vest that the monkey is wearing is the imitation of Ludwik's red vest that was the topic of public controversy.

That the monkey suddenly opened the door is not a problem. The problem is, Queen Katerina was standing in front of the door. Not only that, she's focusing on Ludwik with a terribly paled face, tightly furrowed eyebrows, and eyes filled to the brim with reproach.

Mainly on where Ludwik's hands are.



His hand that held up the tape measure was touching the upper side of Lottie's small, developing breasts. Even if it's a common sight between a designer and his model, to an outsider, surely it looks like a lecherous man plotting to do bad things to a young girl.

"No no, I'm just taking her measurements!"

He explained.

However, Queen Katerina immediately begins to shake her shoulders and

quiver her lips. As she grabs the white monkey Kiki, who had been hanging dexterously from the doorknob, she yells in Endrish,

“Zlotto!”

And threw Kiki at him.

“Uwaahh!”

Failing to foresee that she would throw her pet monkey at him, Ludwik let go of the tape measure and stood in front of Lottie so as to cover her. Kiki latched onto Ludwik’s face and scratched with all his might using his small claws.

“Uwaaahh, Uwaaahh!”

In the king’s private chamber which ought be peaceful, screams resound one after another.

“Big Brother!”

With a bright red face, Queen Katerina walked briskly towards Lottie, who was in a panic trying to pull Kiki away from Ludwik’s face, and grabbed her arms. She spoke in a flurry, saying things like “You mustn’t be together with such an immoral man! How lecherous despite a sincere-looking face! Argh, I’ve had it. Lechers who pretend to be refreshing are the worst!” with a dreadful impetus as she took Lottie outside with her.

“Big Brotheeeeer—”

Ludwik heard Lottie’s voice fade away while being scratched mercilessly by Kiki.

Ludwik only learned that “zlotto” means pervert after Lottie left the castle to return home while still worried about Ludwik.

Ludwik, whose face was full of scratches, was looking down at the definition in the dictionary with a sour look. Adelheid addressed him with a meek face,

“The reason Her Majesty visited Your Highness’s bedroom is that I had told her that Sire’s little sister wanted to see her pet monkey. I thought that if Sire’s little sister and her pet are present, a gentle mood would arise in which Your Majesties would be able to reconcile. It appears that my analysis was still far too shallow. I’m deeply remorseful.”

She lowered her head.

Naturally, there hasn't been a word of apology from Queen Katerina.

"It's your fault for doing things that would be misunderstood. Even if the two of you are siblings, there's a limit to things. Your hand that held up the tape measure was lewd, and your eyes that looked up at your little sister as you were kneeling were the very eyes of a criminal."

She had said something along those lines...

Ludwik closed the Endrish dictionary and said in a steep voice.

"Alas, things have become even stormier. At this point, I just want to eat what I like and do what I like leisurely by myself to rejuvenate my body and soul for the rest of the day. As such, please bring my meals to my room."

"I don't mind, but the truth is a bit of work has piled up."

"Hah? You didn't say anything about that during the day."

"After the daily briefing a large amount of paperwork that I need Sire to look over suddenly came in."

"How much?"

"About this much."

Ludwik gazed dumbfoundedly at the documents and files that Adelheid had had someone bring piled into a mountain on the table.

There's ten times more than usual!

"I'll have your meals brought to you as you wish. That would let you work more efficiently too. How about a Lavinian-styled custard royale stuffed with duck and garnished with Cassis sauce? It's the chef's self-boasted specialty. The black truffle soup and Doloonian-styled quail and avocado salad are superb as well."

As Ludwik gazed back at the mountain of pending documents, he muttered weakly,

"...I want buttery baked potatoes with skin on, minced pork stuffed-cabbage stew, boiled fish head seasoned with wine lees... Also, teriyaki grilled snake and

watered-down wheat-beer.”

Ludwik lists his comfort foods that he fell back on back when he was living a rich life as a commoner, upon which

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think such dishes are in the chef’s repertoire. I could explain the details and have him attempt an imitation, but I’m afraid it might hurt his pride as the king’s chef, so I can’t recommend doing so. As for the beer, we don’t have any, so I’ll have top grade wine diluted with lots of water in its place.”

Adelheid says nonchalantly.

(Are you telling me that once one becomes king, one can’t even drink cheap tavern wheat-beer nor eat rustic stew anymore?)

Feeling increasingly dispirited, Ludwik dropped his shoulders.

That was the night that Ludwik snuck out of the castle and ran to visit a pub in town.

Chapter 4: The Ideal Husband and Wife and the Prophecy of the Forest

(Like I could live a life without wheat beer!)

As night took over and the bright moon of autumn surfaced in the sky, Ludwik snuck out from the rear gate of the castle while wearing the clothes of a townsman.

The grass that littered the fields rustled noisily as he ran down the hill the castle rested on with firm steps.

He wasn't planning to abandon his duties as the king.

Like his stepfather said when Adelheid came to receive Ludwik, that's something that God decided so it can't be helped, he has no choice but to accept it.

However, Ludwik has had enough. Whether it's his sour relationship with Queen Katerina, the high class dishes that he would bite his tongue trying to pronounce, or the lack of freedom that prevents him from interacting with his family much, the work that consists only of reading documents and stamping them, Ludwik was sick of it all. The resentment that accumulated and accumulated within Ludwik since he became king finally exploded from the incident where he was scratched by Queen Katerina's pet monkey.

(There shouldn't be a problem in letting loose once in awhile.)

And so, he executed his plan to "sneak into town", a classic feature in fairy tales.

As Ludwik breathed in the fragrance of trees wet from the evening dew and frolicked with the cool air blowing against him, he ran with all he had for the first time in awhile, sucking in lungfuls of fresh air until he merrily arrived at the town.

"I'm back—! My town!"

He spread his two hands and yelled out.

After which, he entered the first tavern he caught sight of and toasted fellow customers he met for the first time with a mug filled with wheat beer to the point that the head foam spilled over and fell.

“My wife is intense like you wouldn’t believe. She set a monkey loose on me, spurring it to scratch me.”

Ludwik grumbled jovially.

“Hoooh. So that’s where your scratches come from. It’s spoiling your handsome face, lad.”

“So the punchline is what you did to deserve that right?”

He was teased like so.

“No way! I haven’t even held hands with a girl outside my family since I married her. Yet, as I was enjoying some private time with my little sister whom I hadn’t seen in awhile, she showed up and called me a pervert while throwing a monkey at me. A monkey, you know? A monkey. Is that sane? And after all that, she said that it was my fault for doing things that would be misunderstood and turned her head to the side sharply with a cold face, refusing to apologize. Partway through, she shot a glance my way, so I flinched thinking she might apologize, but then she just turned away again.”

“That wife of yours sounds a lot like Her Majesty.”

Everyone burst out laughing.

The queen’s high pride and the discord between her and the king was well known even beyond the castle walls.

If Adelheid heard this, she’d probably say, “This is a problem” and frown. If Ludwik was sober he’d probably have shut up, but since he was drunk,

“Is her face as divine as Her Majesty’s as well?”

Upon being asked,

“She’s a beauty like the fairy queen who rules the spirit world in the forest. But she only ever glares at me, never showing me a smile.”

Ludwik loudly replied.

“Wow, she really is just like Her Majesty!”

“Her Majesty really isn’t a girl one should take as one’s bride, huh—”

“Yeah, I agree. I’d rather have a wife who’s just a little cute but cheerful and hard working.”

Ludwik nodded firmly at everyone’s words which resonated with him.

“You’re exactly right. One should never marry a princess, especially like one from the grand northern empire that reads the Holy Book aloud in Endrish every night.”

He hoisted up his mug and swallowed the contents in one gulp.

Applause arose from the other patrons whom Ludwik had bonded with from this heartfelt talk.

“Yeah, that’s right! Just drink and forget such a high and wry wife.”

“You’d be a looker if not for those scratches, so search for a better girl. Just divorce that wife akin to an icicle.”

Someone proposed.

For just a moment, Ludwik felt guilty towards Queen Katerina.

(Well, she’s having a hard time too, coming from a faraway country to marry a man she can’t stomach. Her attendants that escorted her here have all returned home, and she’s all alone in a country where everything’s different, whether it be the language or the culture.)

He opened his mouth and was about defend her, but realized that even if he did, it wouldn’t do anything but kill the atmosphere.

That’s right, today I’m here to take a breather, so forget reality.

“Alrigh—t! I’m gonna divorce her—!”

As Ludwik yelled and gulped down another mugful of wheat beer, everyone cheered and clapped even louder than before.

“Well said!”

“Now that’s a man!”

“Divorce her—!”

“Give her the divorce she deserves!”

He was cheered on by the patrons one by one and patted roughly on the shoulders. Having wheat beer poured into his mug from all directions, Ludwik drank and drank jovially and enjoyed making a scene.

A few hours later—

“Hahaha, I’ll divorce you—”

Dead drunk, Ludwik walked through the forest alone.

The sky is still dark, and the stars are shining clearly.

He left the tavern intending to return to the castle before dawn, but as he is drunk, his legs were wobbling and he couldn’t figure out the right direction.

“Was the castle this way?”

“Ahh, I’m getting the feeling that it’s this direction too.”

“No, it’s this way after all.”

Eh, whatever. I should arrive somewhere before long. As Ludwik staggered onward with a carefree attitude, he inadvertently wandered deep into the forest.

A third of Rhodesia’s territory is covered by green forestry. Thus, if one kept walking one direction at random, it’s very likely one would encounter a forest.

Ludwik continued staggering through the forest optimistically, figuring that if he gets past the forest then there should be a road somewhere near. In reality, forget getting past the forest, he’s wandering deeper and deeper into it; however, he doesn’t notice.

Giant trees towered over him as far and high as he could see. The leaves stained black from the darkness swayed mysteriously as they were blown by the cold night wind. Perched atop a twisting branch whose shape was like that of a monster’s claw, a large owl reflected golden light from its pupils and eerily cried “Ho—ho—.”

“I’m breaking up with you—! We’re divorcing—!”

Ludwik yells as he staggers onward merrily.

Ludwik forgot the warning that all Rhodesian parents drill into their children: “Do not walk too deeply into the forest. A spirit world exists in the forest where mysterious beings live. If they catch you, you won’t be able to return home.”

The air suddenly chilled as a strong wind blew past the trees, bending the branches backwards, after which a majestic voice sounded from an uncertain direction.

“Human king, you are not to trespass beyond this point.”

Resounding gently in the darkness was a mystical voice.

“Hwhat? Did someone say something?”

Ludwik surveyed the scenery to both his left and right restlessly, but no one was there. Next, he turns backward. There were only thick and overgrown trees basking in the moonlight without a trace of anyone.

“Haha, my ears must be playing tricks on me.”

He laughed and proceeded forward, upon which a thin girl suddenly appeared right before him seemingly out of nowhere. His heart almost froze.

“!”

Even though he didn’t see anyone when he checked just now nor did he sense any movement since—

Furthermore, the young girl was clearly abnormal.

She looks as old as Lottie and was wearing a dress made of a thin and transparent material over her delicate arms and legs that are as thin as a stick. The cloth of her dress absorbed the moonlight and shined fluorescently.

(Is that... silk? No, silk isn’t that transparent. This dress is lustrous and even finer than silk, almost as if it was knit with threads of light.)

The cloth was unknown even to Ludwik who used to be the young master of a dressmaker.

Moreover, given the season is autumn right now, the forest is very cold at

night. Yet, she's wearing a dress thin enough to make out her body lines. For such a young girl to be out here alone at this time of night would normally be unthinkable.

Her almond shaped eyes like that of a cat were golden and she carried a gravity that didn't match her apparent age. It's as if it's this young girl that's older than Ludwik and by far.

And more than anything else, what caught Ludwik's eyes was the color of her hair.

It is a vivid blue like a bead of sapphire.

Ludwik has never met someone with hair like hers before.

Her lustrous blue hair is long enough to cover the entirety of her thin body. To Ludwik, it looked as if the girl wearing clothes made of light has azure wings spreading out from behind her.

The girl spoke again with a mysterious voice.

"If you set foot past this point, you won't be able to return home anymore."

Ludwik finally recalled the admonition to not walk too deeply into the forest that all Rhodesian citizens know.

And also that in the spirit world that exists somewhere in the forest live beings with mysterious powers.

Is this blue-haired girl someone from the spirit world referenced in fairy tales and legends? Or am I simply hallucinating from being too drunk?

Ludwik didn't feel scared at all; instead, he felt a stinging sadness well up and fill his heart.

"I don't need to go back..."

(Huh, what am I saying?)

Why did I suddenly say something like that?

I was planning to return to the castle by morning.

Really, he just wanted to have a little bit of fun as just another regular townsfolk again, eating and drinking and making some noise. He had planned to

return to the castle and his days of stamping documents after being refreshed tonight.

Because that's his duty as the king.

(That's right, I've gotta return to the castle.)

"I— I don't need to go back. I don't want to go back... after all, there's nothing there that I want."

Words spontaneously spilled out.

Those were probably his true feelings as well— the ones of his other side.

What he dreamed of was having a fulfilling job and a cheerful wife who has it together and loves dancing.

He dreamed of helping the girls who visited the store be pretty and living a modest but blissful life dancing and laughing with the one he loves.

However, to Ludwik, there isn't any meaning in his work that consists of merely stamping a seal, nor is there a cheerful wife who loves dancing waiting for him in the castle.

There's only a noble princess who hates dancing and would set a monkey loose on her husband and slam a Holy Book onto his forehead.

Even if Ludwik doesn't return, she surely wouldn't be sad. On the contrary, she might be delighted that she could return to her culturally refined homeland.

So, it's fine even if he's taken to the spirit world as is and becomes unable to return home. As Ludwik concluded this with his intoxicated mind, the blue-haired girl narrowed her golden eyes as if pitying him.

"What a waste."

"Eh?"

What's a waste?

To Ludwik who stared at her puzzledly, the blue-haired girl announced solemnly,

"Even though you are a rare possessor of great fortune."

“Ehh?”

Is she referring to how I became king? But it's not like I gained happiness from becoming king; rather, my life was much more carefree as a commoner, and I would have also presumably been able to marry a girl I like.

The young girl spoke further.

“If you so desired, you could surely become the master of the garden of paradise.”

The master... of the garden of paradise?

“All that others envy, you shall obtain: whether it be status, wealth, love, or peace. The First to the Sixth that are necessary for that to happen shall become yours.”

As if she can clearly see Ludwik's faraway future, the girl's voice carrying words that sounded like a blessing but also like a curse drifted through the dark forest.

“However, only the Seventh shall not become yours.”

Ludwik didn't know what the Seventh meant, but the instant the young girl declared this, he felt as if his heart was gorged out.

“The one thing you'll yearn for to the point of crying and screaming shall surely never become yours.”

Ludwik's heart throbbed again in pain.

To be unable to have something I'll wish for to the point of crying and screaming, that's simply too cruel.

“This is all a dream right? I'm seeing a dream after I fell asleep, no? If this is a dream and not reality— then can't you say something a bit more hopeful?”

To Ludwik who complained, the young girl answered with a majestic voice.

“Though you and the seventh will part, the First to the Sixth shall remain yours. Well, it's not such a bad life. Keep pursuing happiness without lamenting. You acting on the things you desire shall surely lead you to the garden of paradise.”

The trees' branches shook and the leaves rustled noisily.

A cold gust howled sharply as it blew right past Ludwik. Bits of dirt and dry leaves hit Ludwik's cheeks and nose dispersedly, causing him to reflexively cover his face with both hands and close his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, the young girl with blue hair had disappeared without a trace.

"O—i! What do you mean by the seventh?! What am I going to obtain?! What am I going to part with?!"

Even if he yells this—

"O—i."

"O—i."

He only hears his own voice echoing back; he doesn't hear the mysterious and majestic voice of the young girl.

Before he realized, he was standing on the side of a lake faintly illuminated by moonlight. Even though he was deep in the forests until just now!

As Ludwik was unable to grasp the situation at hand, he heard the sound of water splashing.

A black shadow in the shape of a human projected into his eyes.

Someone's walking into the lake.

A long-haired— woman.

To bathe in cold water this deep into the night isn't normal. Is she planning to drown herself?

"Hey you, what are you doing?!"

Ludwik dashes forward as he calls out to her loudly.

Upon which, the woman turns his direction.

Just then, the clouds completely covered the moon, causing the lake in front of him to darken as if dyed with black ink. Ludwik could tell that the woman caught her breath as she looked up at his face, but he couldn't make out her

figure or face clearly.

She seems to be young still.

“I don’t know what happened, you mustn’t kill yourself.”

When Ludwik said this firmly, the woman stirred slightly and groaned faintly in the darkness.

As the air trembled, and Ludwik’s heart pounded thump-thump, she muttered in a voice seeping with sadness,

“Ludy.”

Penetrating deep into his heart, it was an unforgettable voice filled with sorrow.

(Why does she know my name?)

Ludwik was baffled, but at the same time, he was sure he knew the person with this voice for some reason.

Right.

She’s my precious—

This time, things suddenly became bright all around him, as if he was thrown into a world of pure light. When the light died down and his vision became clear again, he was enveloped in a faint white mist of snow.

Both the nighttime lake and the woman with the sorrowful voice had disappeared.

In their place, Ludwik saw a woman with a graceful figure wearing an extravagant dress that features laces, pelt, and embroidery walking in front of him.

Upon her straight and slender back rustles bright, golden hair the color of melted gold back and forth.

Even though I should know this woman as well, I can’t recall who she is.

Together with her golden hair, the hem of her white dress sways slowly from side to side as she walks into the distance.

She'll be gone if I don't chase after her.

Anxiety made Ludwik's head throb in pain as if it's going to crack.

But, his legs won't move! Enveloped in the mist of snow, the slender silhouette fades away.

He tries to call out her name, but he can't recall it.

Even though she's definitely, unmistakably, someone he knows.

In place of his voice which is stuck in his throat, he reaches out his hands desperately.

"To me, you— you are my—"



When he opened his eyes, there were two moist black eyes just above his face peering into his eyes.

She peered at him with the loving gaze of a mother looking at her newborn. Her full, red lips looked soft, and her graceful black hair, meandering like a wave, spilled over her shoulders.

"Are you awake?"

She asked gently with a voice that's kind and warm just like her gaze.

"Where am I...?"

He can see a wooden roof above her.

It's a plain roof made by simply setting wooden planks next to each other. The walls also have a plain design, and the hearth is made of uneven stone slabs. There's a fire burning bright red inside the hearth, and a large pot sullied with soot rested on a grill above. It seems that a stew is being made, as the pleasant aroma of milk and herbs continues to drift towards Ludwik along with a trail of steam.

"You collapsed in the middle of the forest, you know? Yan found you on his way back from work and carried you on his back to our home. Your face is full of scratches, so he was startled, thinking you were attacked by a bear. But after noticing that you reeked of alcohol, he felt relieved, realizing that you simply

fell asleep drunk. He thought, 'Ahh, thank goodness.'"

Embarrassed, Ludwik blushed as he looked up at her glistening eyes and full, soft lips forming a smile.

The reason he blushed is as follows: one, he was embarrassed that he passed out drunk in the forest.

Two, her smile was simply too kind and lovely.

Her smile is soft and airy like the steam vapor that smelled of stew; just seeing it is enough to heal one's heart.

"Ahh, so you're awake now mister."

A small, skinny man bobbed over unsteadily. He's a kind-looking man with messy red hair and green eyes.

He looks to be quite a bit older than Ludwik in one way, yet also about the same age in another. Due to his short height, his face which still carries an air of innocence, and his unguarded expression, Ludwik couldn't grasp his age well. But, surely he's not that young.

"Are you Mr. Yan, the one who helped me?"

Ludwik got up halfway in his bed and inquired, upon which

"Yeah, that's right. You were lying on the ground facing upwards and didn't wake up even when I shook you, so I brought you here."

Yan answered amiably while smiling. It should have been hard for him to carry Ludwik with those skinny hands and legs.

"I'm sorry for the trouble."

Ludwik bows his head down deeply, upon which

"It's fine, it's fine. E'rryone does foolish things in his youth. Please relax and res' up until morning."

Yan says.

His speech had quite a heavy accent, but it wasn't unpleasant. It seemed to emphasize his simple and honest character, making Ludwik feel warm inside.

“Daddy, is he a guest?”

“Who aah you?”

A boy and a girl around the same age as Martin came out from behind a divider curtain rubbing their eyes.

The boy has red hair and black eyes, while the girl has black hair and green eyes. The boy’s hair was short and messy while the girl’s hair was braided into twintails. Aside from that, they look identical.

It seems they were sleeping behind the curtain but woke up upon hearing their parents’ and Ludwik’s voices. Yan didn’t drive them away; on the contrary, he adoringly picked both of them up, one with each hand.

“Le’ me introduce them, mister. These two are our twins Theo and Shenna. They’ll be turnin’ five soon.”

“Hi, I’m Theo.”

“I’m Shenna.”

The twins greet Ludwik.

“Mister, why is your face all scratched up?”

“That looks cool. Can I feel it?”

“Hey now, Theo, Shenna. That’s not okay.”

Yan hastily pulls back the two twins who bent forward towards Ludwik trying to feel his scratches.

“These scratches were made by a pet monkey that I keep at home. You can feel them if you’d like.”

Ludwik smiled and presented his face to them, upon which the two of them happily smeared their hands all over Ludwik’s cheeks and nose.

“I’m sorry, mister.”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like they’re hitting my face roughly; they’re feeling my face in a polite and considerate manner. Your children are very cute.”

“Yea. They’re our proud children—. There’s one more, Collin, who was born last ye’r. It seems like he’s sound asleep.”

Yan says as he narrows his eyes and smiles. And then, in a bashful manner,

“And, this here is my wife and the mother of these kids, Suzanka.”

He introduces the woman with black hair.

She too smiled happily and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Suzanka, the mother of these kids and Yan’s wife.” with a cheery voice.

From just this short exchange and the gentle expression on their faces with loose lips and narrowed eyes, Ludwik can tell that Yan and Suzanka are a happy couple who love each other deeply.

That’s the kind of tone and expression they’re making.

“Errr, my name is Ludy.”

I see, so your name is Ludy. Well Ludy, there’s still some time before mornin’, but since the kids woke up, let’s just eat breakfast now. To begin with, we eat breakfast early in this household. I work in the evenings, so when I come back home I eat an early breakfast then sleep until noon. The rest of ’em kindly eat breakfast at the same time to match my schedule. Feel free to join us if you’d like. Ah... if your hangover isn’t too bad that is.”

To Yan’s warm offer, Ludwik replied with a smile from the heart,

“I’ll gratefully take you up on that. The truth is, since I woke up, something has smelled so good that I thought my stomach would growl.”

The plain meal consisted of rye bread and a stew of bird meat mixed with vegetables. However, soaking pieces of the hard rye bread in the soup and eating them together was astonishingly delicious. It had a sweet and hearty taste with the fragrance of milk and herbs blended together that was accentuated by umami from the stock of the bird bones.

The twins Theo and Shenna thought so as well.

“Tasty, so tasty.”

“I like mommy’s stew.”

The twins eat clumsily with a smile, getting scraps of bread and stew stuck around their mouths. Noticing this, Suzanka uses her slender index finger to gently wipe away the food stuck around the twins' mouths while Yan watches over the three of them fondly with a gentle smile.

"Suzanka is great at cooking. With just a few modest ingredients, she can conjure up an ample feast like a magician—. Of course, the taste is supreme as well—!"

Suzanka laughed cheerfully at Yan's lovey-dovey praise.

"Well, Yan always comes home to eat everyday, so I don't think he knows anyone's cooking besides mine. He says my cooking is the best, but that's because he has nothing to compare it to. There are plenty of foods more delicious in the world after all—."

She addresses Ludwik while wearing a warm expression as if to say just how achingly dear her generous husband is to her.

"No, this stew truly is the best. I haven't had anything so scrumptious in a long time."

Ludwik responds from the heart.

Ludwik had forgotten just how warm and fulfilling food eaten with family while smiling at one another was.

In the castle, he and the queen finished their meals in silence sitting on opposite ends of a long table. Because of that, Ludwik couldn't enjoy his meals at all despite being served food arranged onto expensive plates made from luxurious ingredients by a first-rate chef.

(If only my "household" could be like this...)

A kind and cheery wife and a generous husband. Adorable children who takes after the two of them.

A heartwarming dining table.

Even though they can't be very well-off considering that they live in a small cabin out in the woods, everyone's smiling gaily.

His chest rumbled with yearning.

Yan, the household head, makes a living playing violin on boulevards and in pubs at night. Sometimes he gets gigs for festivals and weddings, which he says helps a lot as they pay the most. As it's autumn right now, there will be more weddings coming up, so he wants to earn enough money to buy pretty clothes, warm blankets, and sweet confectioneries for his wife and kids, he says.

"Yan's playing is wonderful like sunshine. No matter when I hear him play, I'm always filled with hopeful and blissful feelings."

Suzanka moistened her black eyes tenderly, expressing how blessed she feels.

"Haha, well, this is the only thing I'm good at. Still, it's not like I learned from a famous teacher; plus, my violin is a secondhand worn-out one."

Yan scratched his head beneath his messy hair as he humbled himself, but Ludwik was sure that to Suzanka, Yan's playing fills her heart more than any other musician's, no matter how outstanding, ever can.

"I'd like to thank you somehow for helping me when I passed out in the forest and even treating me to scrumptious stew."

Ludwik says gratefully, upon which Yan's face lit up in a flash.

"In that case, could you dance with Suzanka?!"

"Eh?"

Dance?

To Ludwik who was baffled,

"Suzanka loves to dance. But, I can't dance because I have a bad leg, so please dance for me. In exchange, I'll play a tune for you two to dance to."

Yan says more and more fervently.

Now that he mentioned it, he was dragging his leg a bit when walking. But, regardless, is it really okay for me to dance with his wife right in front of him?

As Ludwik was hesitating, he heard a cheery voice.

"I'd love to dance with you."

Ludwik turns his head to the side, upon which he sees Suzanka beaming at him with her hand extended towards him.

Her black eyes that shined brightly were staring straight at Ludwik. Her full lips formed a merry smile.



Enticed by her irresistible, vivid smile more charming than any noble lady's reserved smile, Ludwik irresistably took Suzanka's hand.

Suzanka's hand has calluses and chaps; it's the hand of a working woman. Ludwik grabs her hand tightly, upon which he feels a firmly elastic warmth; like so, she returns his grip with her own vigorously.

Yan begins playing with an upstroke.

Suzanka begins dancing nimbly.

Two pairs of toes beat against the floor with a lively rhythm, and their heels spin around and around like a weather vane. Suzanka's skirt, which was made by patching together many pieces of cloth, spread out widely as it fluttered about like a dress of the finest quality.

Her round, feminine waist twists and turns supply, and her vigorous arms extend in and out flexibly, matching the rhythm of the music, pulling Ludwik and Suzanka close then pushing them apart each time.

Suzanka's fair feet didn't stop for a single moment; before Ludwik could ever take the lead, she always skipped somewhere new passionately, inviting him along.

Ludwik was blown away by her adroit footwork.

How vigorously she dances!

And how jolly she looks!

Her black eyes are sparkling spiritedly. Her full lips and cheeks are forming a joyous smile.

"Before I married Yan, I did gigs as a dancer for a long time. That's why I love dancing!"

Suzanka shouts with a bright voice.

Her voice and words resounded and expanded in Ludwik's chest alongside sweet throbbing until they burst.

—That's why I love dancing!

"Ludy, your mother loves dancing!"

"Me like dancing too."

Ludwik recalled how he danced with his mother in a room of an old apartment when he was a child. When his mother was dancing, she always looked truly happy with a bright smile on her face.

Ludwik had always thought that if he was to marry, he'd like his bride to be someone he could dance with.

That was because his late mother loved to dance.

Since he was a child, his mother would also take his hand, teaching him how to dance.

Especially before his mother married, when they were still living together by themselves, she would always invite Ludwik to dance in both joyous and sorrowful times.

—Let's dance, Ludy.

She would take Ludwik's hand tenderly, and the two of them would spin around and around endlessly in the narrow living room.

—Your father was incredibly good at dancing, you know. Even though he was a clumsy person who would often bump into others when in a crowded place, he never bumped into anyone when he was dancing; he danced with amazing grace and ease. That was so unfair—. After being shown his unreliable side through and through, I was shown such wonderful steps and led with such care. How could I not fall in love?

She would colorfully recite memories of the past with bright laughter and lively steps.

—So, Ludy; when you dance, do so as if you're the king and your partner's the queen.

If you do that, the girl who dances with you will fall in love with you, his mother would say...

Each girl is cute and charming in her own way, but when she dances, she's ten times lovelier.

That's Ludwik's unchanging philosophy. Whenever he dances with a girl, he always feels like he's in love with her— his head becomes dizzy and his heart springs as he's filled with happiness.

That's why, he was sure that if he dances everyday with a wife who likes to dance, he would always be in love with her.

Like so, Ludwik recalled the things he used to dream excitedly about one after another.

Suzanka's glistening black eyes, lustrous black hair, cheerful and passionate red lips, and ample bosom overlapped in Ludwik's mind with the image of his mother when he was young.

When dancing, both his mother and Suzanka would smile from the heart and continue to step and spin as if fatigue wasn't in their vocabularies.

Every time they turned their toes, their skirts would flutter floridly like flower petals whirling in the wind, causing Ludwik's heart to thump as he was spellbound.

Similarly, Yan too is watching his wife intently with the gaze of a lad who just fell in love for the first time.

He continued to bow his violin ardently as if he couldn't hold his happiness at seeing his wife dancing gaily within him.

The timbre of the sound was endlessly bright and sunny. Just hearing it lightens one's heart and moves one's feet naturally.

(It's just as Suzanka said! Yan's performance is splendid!)

—Yan's playing is wonderful like sunshine. No matter when I hear him play, I'm always filled with hopeful and blissful feelings.

When Yan's playing accelerates passionately, Suzanka's steps intensify alongside it; when Yan's playing slows down tenderly, her movements also become modest alongside it. The brighter the timbre of Yan's violin becomes, the brighter Suzanka's lips shine and her eyes sparkle in joy.

It's as if Suzanka, while dancing with Ludwik, is also dancing with Yan.

Yan's playing is making Suzanka dance this gracefully and vivaciously.

Upon realizing this, Ludwik's heart squeezed tight.

(Yan and Suzanka love each other.)

Because they're bound by an unshakable bond, he's fine with letting his wife dance with another man. Likewise, even if she dances with another man, she smiles because she's thinking of her husband.

Yearning for such a beautiful bond himself, powerful emotions, which he had

imprisoned inside himself, strangled his throat with stinging sadness.

—Could you teach me how to say, “May I have a dance with you?” in Endrish?

—I hate dancing.

(Ahh, I was really shocked by those words from the queen, wasn’t I—)

Even Queen Katerina has her reasons for being cold to Ludwik. To become the wife of a half-commoner, she was left behind all by herself in a foreign country. She’s a pitiful girl.

Even if Ludwik understands this, he still can’t help but get nervous when she looks at him coldly, and he’s still hurt when she throws sharp words his way.

Here, there is no such tension or coldness.

While Ludwik and Suzanka danced, next to them, the twins Theo and Shenna had also taken each others’ hands and have been spinning round and round. The two are giggling while frolicking. Suzanka and Yan gaze at them tenderly then exchange glances and smiles at each other.

Even if Suzanka’s dancing with Ludwik, she’s thinking of Yan and her children and enjoying this time with her family, who are doing the same, all the while.

All of the happiness that Ludwik hoped for was gathered in this small cabin; yet, it is something that does not belong to and seems faraway from him.

—The one thing you’ll yearn for to the point of crying and screaming shall surely never become yours.

As the words of the young girl with blue hair echoed in his mind like a curse that can’t be overturned, causing a sharp pain to pierce his heart—

The cries of an infant sounded in the back.

“Collin!”

In a flash, Suzanka separates from Ludwik and rushes to the divider curtain, brushing it aside.

In the cradle behind it, there lies an infant wrapped in a blanket. She picks him up and peers into his eyes.

“Hi, Collin. What’s wrong? Are you hungry? Yeah? Okay, I’ll feed you now.

Give me a second.”

As she gently talked to and rocked him in one arm, she appeared to slide the cloth around her chest to the side, letting him suckle her breasts. She continued to talk to the infant with an affectionate voice all the while.

“Fufu, drink lots and grow big, okay? Then when you grow up, let’s dance together.”

From where Ludwik is standing, the figure of Suzanka’s back appears effeminately supple and incredibly gentle. She’s holding her infant in her arms preciousy, who has now completely calmed down, and is mindlessly sucking away on his mother’s breasts.

Watching over them, Yan’s gaze also became tenderer and tenderer, and the twins, seeming to love their younger brother very much too, grin widely as the room is filled with the sweet scent of milk.

Ludwik’s heart tightens, and his vision becomes hazier and hazier.

“Ludy! What’s wrong?!”

Yan raised his voice bewilderedly.

Suzanka, who was breastfeeding, also turned around looking startled. Upon seeing Ludwik crying, her eyes opened widely.

“Are you feelin’ ill? Does it hurt somewhere?”

“Mister, why are you crying?”

“Did something sad happen, mister?”

The twins also walked up to Ludwik briskly and looked up at him with worried faces.

(E, eh? Why am I crying? Even though I haven’t cried a single time since I became an adult. To cry in tatters like this, in front of people I just met for the first time too—)

“S-sorry.”

Ludwik apologized with a hoarse voice.

However, the sadness that spilled out would not stop once it started. At last,

he couldn't even stand anymore, falling to his knees on top of a mat. He covered his face, and shook his shoulders.

"Just what happened, Ludy?"

Yan asked flusteredly.

It seems like Suzanka also walked over to Ludwik, since the scent of milk became stronger to him.

(Ugh, damn it. I'm so pathetic.)

After getting the words stuck in his throat several times, Ludwik finally managed to squeeze out,

"Because, you're all so enviable... Everyone in the family getting along... thinking of each other... Because, I... I have nothing."

To say that he has nothing when he's the king is insolence.

But, he truly has nothing.

Whether it be a cozy room where everyone is close enough to see each other, a sweet, homemade stew, or a bright wife who would gladly dance with him.

(This must be the one thing I'll yearn for to the point of crying and screaming that the mysterious girl meant. They are all things that I, who am now the king, can never hope to have.)

Yan inquires worriedly,

"Do you not 'ave any fam'ly, Ludy?"

"...I used to, but now I'm alone."

Back in the town, Lottie, Martin, and his stepfather are all there, but he can't visit them freely. Even though Lottie caringly comes to play now and then, chatting while drinking tea from delicate teacups in an extravagant room still feels different from before. Rather than Lottie though, it's surely Ludwik who has changed.

"I'll surely be alone from now on too."

No matter how much he cries, he will never obtain that one thing.

The young girl with blue hair said that Ludwik will obtain everything besides the Seventh.

But, he doesn't want everything.

Just one is enough.

Even though the Seventh, which he will never obtain, could be the most important key to reach the garden of paradise—

“You're not alone, Ludy. You danced with Suzanka for me, so we're friends already. If you're okay with this worn-out hut, you're welcome to come play anytime. And when you do, please dance with Suzanka again.”

“That's right. Besides, until I met Yan, I was also all alone by myself without any family. But now, I have Yan and our children too. That's why, I'm sure you'll be able to build a loving family someday too.

“Mister, don't cry.”

“Here, wipe your face with this.”

The twins brought a hand towel that smells of grass to Ludwik.

“T-thanks.”

As he rubbed the towel against his face, Ludwik wondered if he could really build such a loving family in the future. Even though he already has a wife who hates dancing back at the castle—.

Yan and Suzanka tried to encourage Ludwik, who remained unable to believe in his future, with all they had.

“Wit' your blond hair and green eyes, you're jus' like our new king, Ludwik the First. Once your scratches heal, you'll be just as handsome, and plus, you're good at dancin' too, so any girl will fall in love wit' you if you simply smile at her.”

“Speaking of which, there's a big festival to celebrate the fall harvest tomorrow night. Maybe you'll be able to find a cute girl who's perfect for you there.”

The warm words from Yan's entire family relieved Ludwik so much that he

began to cry again, but this time out of joy. While sobbing convulsively,

“Thank you.”

He repeated over and over again.

Chapter 5: The Maiden with the Flaxen Hair Seeks Love and Adventure

By the time Ludwik returned to the castle, the sun had completely risen.

His Majesty is missing! Could it be he finally ran away after being scratched by Her Majesty's pet monkey!? No, perhaps he was assassinated by Her Majesty!? As such theories rattled throughout the castle, Ludwik, wearing a townsfolk's clothes that had become sullied with dirt here and there and also frayed and torn, returned to the castle with a sunny expression, leaving those who saw him in mute awe.

Ludwik, who felt refreshed after crying himself all out of tears, wore a clear and cheerful face.

"Good morning."

He greets a guard, upon which

"Ah, g-good morning. Umm, where did Your Highness go yesterday?"

"I went to the town for a bit."

"I-Is that so. Did something good happen?"

"Yeah, I had a wonderful encounter."

Ludwik answered with a smile, which startled everyone. All present stiffened their throats in surprise and were unable to ask anything beyond that.

From Adelheid who came running over,

"Is Your Highness aware? Everyone's saying that Sire snuck out of the castle and enjoyed a night of passion. That the other party has blond hair and blue eyes and is the innocent daughter of a florist, and that Sire plans to welcome her to the castle as a beloved concubine. And even that Sire's child is already in her belly."

Even when he was told with the biggest scowl on her face he's seen so far,

Ludwik remained unflustered; just the opposite, he burst out laughing.

“Ahaha. To already have a child with someone after meeting her for the first time yesterday, how amazing. Besides, she isn’t a flower girl with blond hair and blue eyes but another man’s wife with black hair and passionate black eyes.”

Ludwik says impishly.

Adelheid’s expression became increasingly bitter.

“I’m aware that Sire’s scope of interests is broad, but I’ll be troubled if I can’t have Sire wait until Sire has at least two or three boys born between Sire and Her Majesty to enjoy such encounters.”

Ludwik was lectured repeatedly like so, but Adelheid’s words simply went in one of his ears and out the other.

Just by recalling the things that happened in the small cabin in the woods, Ludwik’s heart is cleared of all clouds and filled with sunshine. Adelheid probably won’t be pleased, but I’m still going to sneak out and visit the town again. I’ll become Ludy, who’s just another townsfolk, drink merrily at the pub, and visit Yan’s cabin with lots of gifts. I definitely want to see his family again.

And also, if I could dance with Suzanka again...

Twisting her voluminous black hair, beaming passionately with her black eyes, and stepping powerfully with her feet— Ludwik was entranced by how Suzanka danced.

(Her dance truly was spectacular.)

That was the first time Ludwik had ever met a woman who danced so passionately. It was like she was the one leading her male partner the whole time; yet the experience wasn’t unpleasant in the slightest, but fresh and fun to Ludwik.

Ludwik wanted to continue dancing more and more with her. He wanted to continue holding onto her hot hands while seeing her sunny smile and cheerful laughter.

Suzanka’s vibrant black hair and gentle black eyes fill his mind and inadvertently make his heart flutter.

(Wait! Suzanka is Yan's wife. She loves Yan.)

Ludwik restrains his heart, which seems like it is going to draw closer and closer towards Suzanka if he doesn't.

(No matter how attractive Suzanka is, she's a married woman.)

He was told that he had a wide scope of interests by Adelheid. Well, it's true that he has a soft spot for women like his mother.

When he was the young master of a dressmaker, he had also been paralyzed by an older woman resembling his mother coming to him to ask for advice on what to do about her fiancée, whom she was going to marry in just a few days and whom she just found out was cheating on her.

Ludwik became completely infatuated with her.

—If it were me, I wouldn't do anything to make you cry. Please break up with him and marry me instead.

That he proposed dead seriously like so was part of his black history.

Furthermore, despite saying all those things, like how she can't restore her relationship with him anymore and how the two of them had already lost their love for each other long ago,

—I'm sorry, Ludy. Because of you, I realized— I do love him after all. He said that he won't cheat anymore too.

She told Ludwik before readily reconciling with and marrying her fiancée.

—Ludy, you're really a kind and gentle, nice guy aren't you. I loved you. Thank you for everything until now.

Leaving behind the words "nice guy" that Ludwik heard time and time again from many different girls.

Suzanka is living happily with her husband and children right now.

(That's right. Married women are off-limits.)

Moreover, Ludwik was also completely taken by the simple yet honest Yan, so he can't imagine having an affair with his wife.

To begin with, Suzanka deeply loves Yan, so she'd never turn towards Ludwik

in the first place.

But, even if Suzanka off-limits, if Ludwik could meet and marry a girl like her, would he be able to build a household like Yan's?

—There's a big festival to celebrate the fall harvest tomorrow night. Maybe you'll be able to find a cute girl who's perfect for you there.

(No no, I have a wife already. No matter how you look at it, if I look for a mistress a month into our marriage, she won't have any face as the queen.)

He smiled bitterly.

(A festival huh....)

Ludwik's mind began to race again.

(Back when I lived in the town, I participated every year didn't I?)

Recalling how he would dance with girls wearing their best clothes reserved for special occasions while matching the merry melody of the orchestra, Ludwik's mouth naturally slackened.

Next to him, Adelheid continued to scold Ludwik, warning that lately a group of bandits have been running rampant in the town so it's dangerous to stroll about at night, and that if Duke Walter's faction, who feels no love for him, found out what happened last night, it would become problematic.

However, Ludwik's heart had already left the castle and was flying towards the town where the fall harvest festival will be held.

(Mother said a night festival is where she met King Calvin too...)

At the time, he had listened thinking that it was a silly fabrication of his mother.

—That person's ignorance of the world was staggering. When he tried to buy sweet dumplings from a food stand with a gold coin, the owner told him she doesn't have enough change so she can't accept it. He became all flustered, asking "Eh? Eh? I can't pay with this?" in confusion.

—Even though he was a prince, he wasn't stuck up at all. When I treated him to the sweet dumplings he failed to buy, he said, "Thanks." while looking

terribly embarrassed. He burned his tongue when he put the dumplings in his mouth and caused a scene, too, and he apologized every time he bumped into someone in the crowd, saying “Sorry, sorry.”

—He was a really adorable person!

(Ahh, how nice—)

Imagining his parents’ first encounter naturally filled his heart with warm and sweet feelings.

“You look distracted, Sire. Do you hear what I’m saying? It’s still too early for Sire to dabble in nightly encounters.”

Adelheid’s words could no longer reach Ludwik’s ears.



(I should go and check out the festival after all. Even if I don’t meet my fated partner like Mother and Father, it should be fun just to participate.)

After Ludwik was finally released by Adelheid, he walked down the hallway while thinking of tomorrow’s festival with a bright mood, upon which he saw a dainty foot wearing a silver shoe peek out from a corner of the hallway.

It stepped forward, then immediately retreated back behind the corner. As Ludwik stopped in his path, the tip of the silver shoe peeked out again.

It retreats again,

It peeks out again,

Again—.

“.....”

(Uhhh, could this foot be by any chance...?)

As Ludwik hesitated, Queen Katerina appeared with her lips tied and her whole body stiffened.

The outer ends of her golden eyebrows are hung even higher than usual as she walks towards Ludwik.

Queen Katerina glared at Ludwik with an excessively grim face, so Ludwik

instinctively became nervous.

“H-hey there, morning.”

He greeted her awkwardly.

(Is she mad that I stayed out all night? She didn't seem to care about me at all though.)

Queen Katerina grips the skirt of her dress tightly and says in a chilling voice,

“It's past the time to say morning.”

“Ahh, you're right.”

Ludwik brushes her sharp words off with a smile, upon which one of her furrowed eyebrows twitched.

“.....You have an awfully smug smirk on your face. It seems like you spent last night in the town. Did something very good happen?

“Errr.....”

As Ludwik was considering how he should respond, he gazed back at Queen Katerina's face, upon which he noticed something out of place.

(Huh? Her eyes are red.)

And it seems like there are bags under her eyes too.....

“Could it be that you waited for me last night unable to sleep? Also, there are leaves on your shoulders.”

The instant Ludwik inadvertently reached towards her to try to remove the leaf stuck between the frills on the tip of her shoulder, she retreated backwards with a start and used her hand to brush the leaf off with two sweeps, after which she glared at Ludwik with fearsome eyes.

“D-d-d-delsreta subelarda toris este deranoi! Lerondo! (A-a-a-as if! It's just your imagination! Don't be so full of yourself!) Dela faras yusteemina toriano! (Also, this leaf just happened to fall between the frills okay?!)

Ludwik couldn't follow her rapid Endrish, but he understood from her tone and expression that they were words of repudiation.

“Right, of course. Sorry for saying something stupid.”

Ludwik apologizes, upon which Queen Katerina huffs and puffs a single breath with her eyebrows still sharply pointing downward.

“That’s quite enough.”

She said coldly in Dahl before passing Ludwik’s side and leaving.

While furtively seeing off her tensely straightened back,

(A festival... I wonder if she’ll go with me if I invite her.)

Such a thought popped into his head, but he immediately smiled bitterly and shook his head to the side.

I should give up. The queen doesn’t seem like she’d enjoy a festival of commoners. It’s certain that she’ll reject me just like when I invited her to dance before.



“What!? His Majesty spent a night of passion with the likes of a flower girl!?”

Just past noon, when Therese, the daughter of Duke Folma, visited the salon in the castle dressed up like a peacock, she received the news that King Ludwik had stayed out all night yesterday from her groupies and was left shocked.

(That can’t be! His Majesty did, with a commoner girl!? If he’s sick of his foreigner wife, he has me, the most beautiful girl in all of Rhodesia, right by his side, yet—)

As she gripped her folding fan tightly with her hand that began to tremble all over, she pretended to be calm to the bitter end.

“Ho, hohoho... It’s just a one-night indiscretion in the end. It’s something common amongst noblemen, so it doesn’t bother me really.”

(That’s right. After all, I’m going to become the proper queen of this country, not the girl His Majesty fools around with for one night.)

“As expected from Miss Therese.”

“Miss doesn’t look bothered at all.”

Her groupies lavish words of admiration onto her.

“Hohoho... but of course.”

She opens her fan and turns her nose sharply to the side, but her hand is still shaking a little.

“So, Miss Therese, I hear that His Majesty is going to sneak out again tomorrow night to participate in the fall festival being held in the town.”

“Eh!?”

She bends her body forward without thinking, then hurriedly retracts herself backward and shakes her fan flippity-flap.

“I-I have no interest in something like a festival for commoners. Besides, mixing with commoners to see a festival is unbecoming of a noble daughter. If a lady who does such a thing is found out, she’ll be mocked by everyone.”

Even as she says this on the surface,

(His Majesty is going to secretly join the festival? If I also secretly join the festival and just happen to encounter His Majesty there, His Majesty might feel a sense of fate towards me.)

Therese’s heart begins to beat pit-a-pat.

A groupie chimes in,

“But, I hear there’s an old custom for unmarried men and women to wear masks at the festival, which most people still follow even now. If you do that, then no one will know who you are, and besides, I hear that sons of distinguished families often secretly participate like so as well.”

“That’s right. Moreover, I hear that when he was a prince, King Calvin also secretly joined a festival, which was where he met His Majesty’s mother. How about we also join the festival wearing masks?”

(I see. If I hide my face such that others can’t recognize that I’m Therese of the Folma Family...)

Her heart wavered, but on the surface she remained cold.

“No. It’s not a question of whether you’re found out or not, but a question

about the self-dignity of a noble lady. Those who consider themselves a lady should not casually mingle with commoners.”

While she chides her fellow daughters of nobles,

(If everyone goes, even if I wear a mask, someone might find out who I am. After all, I can’t hide this aura of refinement that naturally exudes out of me. That would be a problem.)

She considers, upon which,

“Oh my.”

A groupie looked towards the door and suddenly raised her voice.

“Is something the matter?”

“No, well, I felt like someone was right outside just now. I caught a glimpse of the hem of a dress and the tip of a shoe for a moment.”

“My, the door is open.”

“Perhaps she was eavesdropping? How unpleasant.”

“Really, how vulgar.”

The noble daughters grumbled one after another and had the maid-in-waiting close the door.

The maid looked down the hallway just to make sure, but there was no one on either side.

Was it just my imagination? I thought I saw a silver shoe... It has to be, or if not, then it had to have been a shoe with a different color that simply looked silver due to the bright sunlight reflecting from it. After all, the only who wears that silver shoe is...)



The festival night, which Ludwik could barely bear waiting for, came.

Though he was banned from leaving the castle by Adelheid, the gatekeepers sympathized with Ludwik who was abused by Queen Katerina.

“If Your Highness wishes to leave the castle, there’s a small hole by the rear

garden that's normally hidden from view behind a wagon. Many in the castle secretly go out to play by using that hole."

They secretly informed him.

Following their tip-off, Ludwik easily escapes the castle walls and descends the hill, heading towards the town under the refreshing moonlight.

The festival had already begun, and the streets were bustling, filled with people everywhere.

The square was illuminated by lights, where food stalls were lined up. Transparent red and blue candy, grilled river fish that were browned, pork skewers dripping with juice, minced bird meat pie, charcoal-roasted sweet and salty dumplings.

The young men at the festival adorned the clothes they usually wear with things like flowers, ribbons, and feathers, while the young women wore coats with puffy sleeves and skirts laced with many frills that they had saved for this day, along with necklaces made of pretty gemstones chained together, glittering brooches full of luster, and their hair that they had curled.

In accordance to tradition, there are many young men and women wearing masks. Ludwik was also wearing a mask along with a wildflower piercing his chest pocket that he plucked on his way here.

It wasn't so much that he didn't want to show his face as that he didn't want the scratches on his face to be conspicuous. Though it's gotten much better, it still hasn't completely healed. He didn't want to frighten the girls.

(Well, I'm a married man so I'm not going to seduce a girl, but asking one to dance with me should be fine, right? It's the fall festival which only comes once a year after all.)

The giant crowd was clamoring with the voices of people talking and laughing, all jumbled together in a mess. As Ludwik walked through the square that is filled with liveliness and enthusiasm, a single girl stayed his eye.

She was walking in the same direction a little ways in front of Ludwik.

As to why the girl caught his eye, it's because she was dangerously unreliable:

often coming to a halt, looking around restlessly left and right, bumping her shoulders into people nearby, stumbling several times, ending up being shoved along when a wave of people push from her side.

She seems terribly unused to navigating through a crowd and has a troubled look on her face. Being overwhelmed by the number of people, she seems unable to figure out how to advance forward.

She's facing forward so Ludwik couldn't see her face, but with a slender waist, supple arms, and healthy thighs that wind down to dainty ankles, she was a girl with a remarkably elegant figure from behind. Her glossy, flaxen hair dangles down to her back.

As for age, she looks to be around sixteen or seventeen.

As she teetered one way then tottered another, Ludwik became worried that she'll fall over. As Ludwik was watching on nervously as if he were on tenterhooks,

The girl suddenly turned around.

As she suddenly turned her small heels, which were covered in leather shoes, trying to reverse her direction, her small head collided forcefully against Ludwik's shoulder, for Ludwik, who had begun to advance towards her, couldn't dodge in time.

"Kyah."

"Wah"

Each raises his, her respective voice.

Repelled by Ludwik's body, the girl's slender body was about to fall over backwards. Ludwik hurriedly winds his arm around her delicate waist to support her.

"I-I'm sorr—"

The girl begins to apologize with a bright, adorable voice.

While doing so, she looks up towards Ludwik's face with her own hidden by a mask.

“!”

Upon which, her shoulders immediately jolt with a start.

“Eh?! Kya—h!”

She chirped.

(What was the “Eh?!” and “Kya—h!” about just now?)

Ludwik was startled as well, causing him to reflexively hold onto her tighter as he flinched.

“P-please, let go.”

The girl appeals while twisting her body.

She then stained her cheeks bright red, and with a voice as faint as a ghost,

“I-I’m fine now, so.”

She added.

“R-right.”

Her bashful demeanor, seeming to signal that she’s not used to interacting with the opposite sex, was simply adorable, causing Ludwik to become flustered as well. He obediently removes his arm, upon which the girl with the flaxen hair cast her face downward and muttered something in a small voice again,

“It’s okay... Calm down, he shouldn’t have realized.”

“Eh?”

“It’s nothing. Now then, excuse me.” I’ll be going now

She turned her back towards Ludwik in a huff, but immediately after, she bumps right into someone in front of her and begins falling backwards once again.

As her body fell towards him,

“What th— watch out!”

Ludwik hurriedly catches her shoulders, upon which this time even her nape begins to flush red as she turns towards him.

“D-don’t mind me.”

She says in a shrill, nervous voice as if she’s feeling vexed and embarrassed before turning her face forward again and walking off while continuing to bump into people.

As Ludwik followed her with his eyes, wondering, “Is she really okay?” worriedly, for some reason the girl stopped and slooowly turned backwards towards him as discretely as possible, as if to observe him.

The moment her eyes met with his,

“!”

Her shoulders jump, after which she turns back around and begins briskly walking forward in a panic. After bumping into and being pushed to the side by several people, she turns towards Ludwik again.

Their eyes meet again.

“!”

She begins walking again, then—

After repeating the same suspicious actions three times, the girl bit her lips with a beet red face and returned to where Ludwik was. She expresses her discontentment,

“You’re troubling me! Why do you keep looking at me?”

“You seem unused to large crowds, so I’m worried whether you’ll be fine. By the way, how am I troubling you?”

“W-, Well— I’m saying that being stared at by a man feels unsettling. That’s why, do kindly stop minding me and go meet your sweetheart already— I mean, please don’t mind me.”

“Sweetheart? I’m not scheduled to meet anyone.”

Ludwik answers perplexedly, upon which the girl accuses him with a doubtful voice.

“You say that, but you’re really scheduled to meet with a coquettish flower girl aren’t you?”

She looked left and right at the people behind Ludwik restlessly.

Why a flower girl? As Ludwik became increasingly baffled,

“It seems she hasn’t arrived yet, huh.”

The girl mutters. Next, she suddenly points her index finger sharply towards Ludwik, almost touching his face.

“You seem like a real softie so I’ll let you know: Just because she sells flowers doesn’t mean that inside, she’s sweet and pure like a flower as well. Flower girls who are master swindlers or assassins are not uncommon even in literature— I mean, even in stories. The moment handsome and sociable men like you, whom one can tell are extremely popular with girls from a mere glance, let their guards down, they’ll be tricked and end up with their heads rolling on the floor.”

“Eh? Ehh?”

Swindlers? Assassins? What is this girl saying all of a sudden?

“For example, concealing a poisonous snake within a flower basket, smearing poison onto flower petals, stabbing your throat once through with the sharp end of a flower stem...”

What kind of girl sees a flower and imagines variations on assassination?

However, her expression is dead serious. Her pointed eyebrows and pouting lips tied slightly to one side look unduly adorable.

“By stuffing your nose and mouth full of flower petals, she could also suffocate you. Even if she’s not an assassin, she could be a swindler. If she says she’s selling flowers to pay for her the medicine of a sick family member, be wary! A confessional backstory of being put into a treasure chest as a baby and set down a river, where she was eventually picked up downstream by an elderly couple requires attention as well.”

“R-right. Thanks.”

(This girl’s a real oddball, but she’s cute, isn’t she.)

Moreover, she’s really pretty.

The upper half of her face is hidden by her mask, but her nose traces a straight line and her lips are small and elegant. Her skin, illuminated by the moon in the sky and the torches lining the streets, is white and translucent like snow.

She's bound to be even more beautiful if she removes her mask.

Her outfit is something a towns girl would wear: a simple blouse topped with a vest and finished with a skirt. However, the textiles used are of good quality, and the sewing was done attentively as well. The design is a bit old-fashioned, like something that would have been popular a decade ago, but that only served to give it a feeling of freshness.

More than anything, her gestures carry an aura of refinement. She's probably the tomboy daughter of some noble family who snuck away to come see the festival.

Listening to her outlandish warnings became more and more amusing, such that Ludwik almost accidentally let some laughter leak out. Struggling to contain himself, his face naturally turned into a smile as he said to her,

"I'll keep my eyes out. But, I really am alone for tonight. If you happen to be alone as well, wanna walk around the festival together?"

"Eh?"

The girl opens her eyes wide behind her mask.

"You can have some peace of mind if you keep watch over me so that I'm not tricked by a malicious girl, right?"

Ludwik says, upon which, while fidgeting her body,

"Y-y-y-you have have a point. If we walk together, I can guard you against swindlers and assassins better when they approach you... as well"

She mutters, turning her chin abruptly to the side.

"Very well. Please stick close to me."

"Thanks, you're a big help."

Ludwik smiles sweetly, upon which her face is stained red again, which she

tries to hide by turning to the side once again.

(This girl seems unused to the festival and dangerously unreliable, so it's best that I look after her.)

Ludwik felt like a guardian. If she knew what he was thinking, she would probably become very angry though.

"Let's go over there first."

She began to step forward, but was immediately repelled by the crowd and unable to advance. Doing his best to contain himself once again,

"It's best not to go against the flow of people. In times like these, you shouldn't rush, but patiently walk in the same direction as everyone else.

As Ludwik offers advice by her ears, her earlobes were stained red and she whimpered as if to express that she felt humiliated.

"T... thanks. I'll contemplate that for now. I mean, I'll keep that in mind."

She persisted in acting tough but still thanked him.

She has an unyielding spirit, but it seems she does have the humility to consider others' words. The reason she expressly corrects her formal speech, which she leaks out at times, into casual speech must be because she usually speaks in formal language.

(For a noble daughter, the plain speech of a townsgirl must feel fresh.)

Ludwik slackens his mouth, upon which the girl testily curved her mouth downwards.

"You may be thinking that I'm a slow and clumsy girl, but that is not the case — I mean, that isn't true. After all, my legs are really quick. I never lost to boys in a race when I was a child. It's just that I've never had a chance to walk around where there are lots of people gathered in one place. Though I may look like this, I actually have an abundance of life experiences and have escaped hell several times."

"The hell that such a delicate-looking girl could escape must be awfully easygoing," Ludwik thought as tried his best to hold his laughter in.

(This girl really is an oddball and a cute one at that.)

“So, I can buy food from the food stands by myself as well. As thanks for helping me when I was about to fall over just now, I’ll offer you something— I mean, I’ll treat you. We’ll be even then.”

The girl checks out the different foods being offered by several stands nearby.

“That looks good.”

She said, twitching her perky nose with glittering eyes at the fragrant aroma coming from the pork skewers of a stall in front of them to their right.

(She said she’d treat me, but she just wants to eat that herself, doesn’t she...)

The girl was about to bump into someone again when Ludwik gently pulled her back, causing her to whimper again in shame. The two slowly but steadily made their way to the pork skewer stand like so, upon which,

“I’ll have two skewers, please.”

She takes out a gold coin from a small silk bag triumphantly and hands it to the owner.

“Missy, I can’t accept this.”

Having her coin returned to her, she opens her eyes wide in a fluster.

“Eh? W-what do you mean? This is a gold coin that’s commonly used throughout the continent. It should be the case in Rhodesia too.”

“Indeed, it’s a Dahl gold coin of the highest purity. However, I don’t have enough change for it—.”

“C-change?”

“Please pay with a cheaper coin.”

“Cheaper coins...? I only have these... Umm, I don’t need the change, so.”

“I can’t accept that! Even if you buy everything I’m selling, I still wouldn’t be able to give you enough change. I’ve done honest business for over thirty years, and I intend to continue doing so.”

“B-but... Then, what should I...”

The girl was at a loss.

—That person's ignorance of the world was staggering. When he tried to buy sweet dumplings from a food stand with a gold coin, the owner told him she doesn't have enough change so she can't accept it. He became all flustered, asking "Eh? Eh? I can't pay with this?" in confusion.

Ludwik, recalling his mother's story of the first encounter between King Calvin and herself, slipped out a chuckle.

"I'll pay. Is this fine, Mister?"

Ludwik says as he takes out two copper coins, upon which,

"Yes, thanks for your patronage! These are freshly grilled and piping hot. I picked out ones with a thick piece of meat for you two."

Ludwik and the girl are each handed a skewer of grilled pork, potatoes, and onions.

The girl stared at her skewer with a complicated face.

"Are you not gonna eat?"

Ludwik inquires, upon which

"If I eat it, you'll be the one treating me. Even though I'm the one who's supposed to treat you."

She mutters as if to say she's unsatisfied.

"Who cares? Either way is fine isn't it?"

"It is not fine! I mean, it isn't fine."

As the girl was objecting, a "Kuu—" sound was heard.

It was not a growl of frustration but a growl from her stomach.

Ludwik's mouth slacken yet again. The girl's face turns into a tomato.

"Your stomach seems to be saying, 'Either way is fine, so let me eat already.'"

"...h"

"It's tastier when eaten while still hot, so let's dig in."

He suggests, upon which the girl wriggles her body.

“W-well, it’s a rare occasion after all. I’ll thank you later. I don’t like owing people without repaying them.”

She says, insistent on repaying him.

“Where are the chairs? Also, where can we borrow a knife and a fork?”

She surveys their surroundings.

“You eat it standing up.”

“Eh?”

“Like this.”

Ludwik demonstrates by picking a piece of meat up with his teeth and pulling it off the top of the skewer into his mouth, upon which behind her mask, the girl’s eyes widen in surprise.

But right after,

“I see! So you eat it standing up!”

Seeming delighted, she grins.

“Thank you for the treat.”

She says, and mimicking Ludwik, opens her mouth wide and pulls a piece of meat off the skewer with her teeth.

However, because the girl’s mouth is very small, she couldn’t fit the whole piece into her mouth. Thus, she had to bite a piece off, which she did with all her might, upon which

“I, it’s hot...!”

She became teary eyed as she furrowed her eyebrows. She frantically chewed the meat then quickly lifted her chin up, gulping it down. She brought her chin back down as she let out a sigh of relief, after which,

“But, it’s delicious!”

She says, smiling with her whole face.

“I’ve always aspired to eat while standing once. It makes me feel like I’m on a

serious adventure!”

She said excitedly. Afterwards, she ate more gracefully, blowing on the meat to cool it before biting off a piece to chew.

It seems her adventure has left her gums with burns that are bothering her. Even so,

“Delicious—. These potatoes and onions too, how are they so tasty when they look like they were just grilled normally?”

She’s moved to wonder.

“There’s sauce around your mouth.”

“Eh!”

The girl wipes her mouth with one hand flusteredly, upon which Ludwik stretches his hand out,

“Not there, here.”

He wipes the side of her mouth then smiles sweetly, upon which she peeled her eyes back in shock behind her mask and her entire body petrified.

“Yup, it’s gone.”

To Ludwik, this was something he was used to doing all the time for his little sister Lottie. It didn’t have any deep meaning to him. But to the girl, things appear to be another story. Her lips tremble like a wave of bubbles as she says,

“T... thank... you. B, but, it isn’t proper to touch a girl so c, casually. I mean, it’s not good.”

Ludwik could only hear bits and pieces of her words due to the noisy surroundings. However, seeing that she’s mumbling and grumbling while turning her face, stained bright-red, downward,

“Umm, I’m sorry.”

He apologized.

“By the way, the candied walnuts taste superb as well. I recommend them.”

The girl looks up at Ludwik with upturned eyes as if still embarrassed.

“Really...?”

“Wanna try some?”

“Well... I, is that something I can buy with a gold coin?”

She asks anxiously.

“I’ll pay for it in advance. When I’ve spent a gold coin’s worth on you, you can pay me back.”

“I, is that so? Then you won’t be treating me, so it’s fine.”

She says, finally raising her chin.

In reality, even if she tries out different food stands until her stomach bursts, to eat a gold coin’s worth of food would require a few months.

“By the way, could you tell me your name by now? I’m Ludy.”

Ludwik says, upon which the girl casts a glance at Ludwik then bends her mouth downward, answering hesitantly.

“It’s Florin.”

“Florin, huh—. It’s a light, nice name.”

Ludwik praises her, upon which she fidgets and says,

“Y, your name isn’t bad either, Ludy. More importantly, where are the candied walnuts?”

“They’re this way.”

Ludwik guided her to the right stand. Florin appeared taken with the candied walnuts as well, extolling

“It’s crunchy and delicious. Ah—, but, the caramel made my hand all sticky. But it’s delicious.”

She looks seriously troubled. Ludwik tells her, “Just lick your fingers.”, and demonstrates by doing so himself. “That’s poor manners. B, but, I’m all sticky, s, so it can’t be helped.” She licks herself hesitantly with her pink tongue as she looks around restlessly to make sure no one’s watching her.

Afterwards, they did things like watch a race of piglets, play ring toss, and

scoop loaches. Florin was overflowing with curiosity; no matter what she looked at, she would glitter her eyes in amazement here and delight there.



Seeing such a vivaciously charming girl, Ludwik couldn't help but slacken his cheeks. Noticing this, Florin reddened her face and wriggled her body, asking with an upset, embarrassed voice,

“Why do you keep smiling at every little thing I do, Ludy?”

“Because it's cute how you're so unused to everything, Florin.”

He replies, upon which she twitches her shoulders and

“Y, you’re used to all this, huh.”

“Yeah, I’m used to it for the most part.”

He was raised as a commoner after all. Walking through crowds and finding delicious food stands come easily to him.

“How indecent.”

“Ehhh?”

“Even though I thought you were a gullible softie so I was worried a trickster taking advantage of you, to think that you’re this used to talking to girls... You’re the real trickster.”

It appears that Florin, who is tying her lips to the side, misunderstood what he meant when he said he was “used to it.” Even as he falters a bit from being glared at, Ludwik thought that that innocent part of her is unbearably cute too.

“But, thanks to my experience, I know what you want next.”

“Oh really, now. What is it then?”

Ludwik bought two cups of strawberry-flavored water and handed one to Florin.

Florin untied her lips and opened her eyes wide, and her face, which had flushed from the heat of the festival, reddened further for another reason as she mumbled, “You’re right.” looking vexed.

“My throat felt really dry.”

She accepted the strawberry water and drank half of it in one go.

Doing so, she widens her eyes again and spilled out a smile.

“Eluuka! (Delicious!)”

She exclaimed.

That was Endrish.

This time, it was Ludwik’s eyes that widened.

Realizing what just happened, Florin covered her mouth with her free hand.

“Do you come from the Endrish Empire?”

He inquires, upon which her eyes behind the mask begin to swim as she fidgets restlessly.

“T, that’s right... Gosh, without thinking, I... No, what should I do? No no, darn it, even though I was being careful, I, I let my guard down. This strawberry water was too tasty, so gosh, geez, no.”

She says, after which she vibrates her head rapidly back and forth, causing her lustrous flaxen hair to tremble along as well. Florin looks so flustered that Ludwik starts to feel a bit sorry for asking.

“Umm, was it something I shouldn’t have asked?”

“Yeah, that’s right, you shouldn’t have asked! N, no, it’s not that... it’s just, i, it sounds cold, right?”

“Eh?”

“...The language of my country.”

She says in a small voice as she cast her face down, bringing her arms close to her body.

“Not at all. Endrish has a lovely ring to it; moreover, when you grinned and yelled, “Eluuka!” just now, it was so cute that my heart skipped a beat.”

Florin opens her eyes wide and lifts her face up.

“Y, you’re lying. When I speak the language of my homeland, everyone says it sounds like I’m putting on airs and belittling them. Of course it does, and really, it’s fine like that... but—”

Florin’s voice shrinks again.

It’s true that the Endrish that comes out of Queen Katerina’s mouth is chilly and sounds like she’s looking down on others, making them feel nervous.

However, the word that flew out from Florin’s mouth was adorable. It might not be scientific, but that’s how Ludwik heard it so it can’t be helped.

“It’s not fine. The people who said that to you are just rude. Both your country’s language and you yourself are very wonderful.”

To Florin, who looked like she was about to cry when she had her breath suddenly taken away, Ludwik spoke slowly and tenderly in Endrish.

“El stella revarnya toris bela (It is my honor to meet you. How beautiful you are.)”

These are the words that Ludwik practiced over and over again before Queen Katerina came to marry him.

The words that failed to reach the queen came out naturally from Ludwik’s lips along with a sweet breath.

Florin’s eyebrows drooped downward, after which she exclaimed with a beet red face.

“Nei, nei (Stop, stop), stop. Why are you saying that? Sberro dela fordia (You’ll make my heart flutter, gosh), even though that’s no good... Ana deesta angrela (I’m fine with being an anathema)...”

She complained to Ludwik with alternating Endrish and Dahl. As she did so, her eyebrows drooped downwards more and more.

Her slender shoulders seem so terribly lonely, causing a sense of duty to rise within Ludwik as one who had served as a confidant to many a woman back when he was the young master of a dressmaker. He inquires,

“Florin, is this country not a happy place for you?”

Even though until just now, she was smiling so gaily, glittering her eyes at everything she saw.

Florin casts her eyes downward.

“Well, that’s... The truth is, I didn’t want to come. But, I had no choice considering the circumstances back home, as I had caused too much trouble...”

After muttering a reply that’s difficult to interpret, she faces Ludwik with moistened eyes and says firmly,

“However, I’ve always admired Rhodesia, and I’ve always wanted to visit. I’ve always dreamed that wonderful things must occur in this country all the time. After all, it’s the country of freedom and stories.”

“The country of stories?”

Slowly— a faint smile surfaces from Florin’s lips.

Her face looks lonely, but at the same time, is showing a gentle smile imbued with admiration. Seeing her complicated expression, Ludwik felt his heart skip a beat as if he were struck by a surprise attack.

Florin weaves words with a serene voice,

“...There are faeries and wizards living in Rhodesia’s forests, no?

“Yeah, that’s how the stories go... That there’s a fairy queen in the forests who rules the spirit world, and that, one must not wander too deep into the forest because of that.”

Ludwik recalls how he encountered a young girl with blue hair at night two days ago when he was wandering through the forest dead drunk.

People keep fairy tales close to their hearts in Rhodesia. They accept the existence of supernatural beings as a given fact.

Hearing Ludwik’s response, Florin’s eyes become increasingly filled with admiration.

“My homeland Endra is a country built upon an endless plain of ice, so I’ve always admired Rhodesia with its expansive forests.”

To think that a girl raised in the advanced Great Empire of the North would envy a rural and small country like Rhodesia... It might be similar to how Ludwik who’s the king envies Yan’s family, who lives together rustically in the forest.

Like how because it’s something faraway that one can’t have, it appears beautiful and precious all the more.

Endrish winters are exceedingly long. Day after day, snow continues to fall. Everyone becomes bored being unable to go outside, so we all gather in front of the hearth and recite stories to one another. Everyone has his, her favorite stories... My number one favorite story is “Paulette the Quick-Eared.”

It’s a story told among Rhodesians as well, so Ludwik knows it as well. Florin begins reciting it energetically,

“Paulette was the youngest daughter of three sisters of a noble family that had gone bankrupt. Her two older sisters were gentle and kind beauties but had no survival skills. Paulette wasn’t as much of a beauty, but she excelled at gathering information and had both the wits to figure out how to make use of her information and the courage to execute her plans. Thus, she set a condition for the brother princes courting her sisters: recover for them her family’s treasures that the ogres, who live in the forests, had stolen from them. Like so, she was able to recover her family treasures one after another, and in the end the ogres were all eliminated and she became the wife of the youngest prince as well. I always get excited when Paulette heads toward the castle in the forest. That’s why, when I first crossed the border into Rhodesia, as the carriage raced through the vivid green forestry that had begun to cover both sides of the road, I was moved to wonder... However, I quickly began to feel sick, and didn’t have the luxury of reveling in the experience anymore.

“Eh, how come?”

Ludwik asks, upon which, she answers despondently,

“I was used to traveling on stone-paved roads, so I had no idea that the carriage would rock so much when traveling on a dirt road... Despite that, I stuck my torso out the window in excitement, so partway through I became hopelessly nauseous. Even after my feet touched ground, it felt like if I moved just a little, I would vomit everything onto the chest of the person who came to welcome me. I felt irritated like I was on tenterhooks and wanted to be by myself as soon as possible.”

“T, that sounds like a hard time.”

“Yes. But, I’m glad I was able to give a bad first impression thanks to that. It let me build myself up to be a woman who’s nasty to the core.”

“I see... You wanted... to give a bad impression?”

“N, no, that’s not it. I just jumbled my words up a bit... But truly, that forest was breathtaking. It would have been even better if I didn’t come alone, but as a pair though”

“A pair? Who’s the other person?”

Ludwik's chest suddenly felt clouded.

He's experienced this sensation before.

"That" development when he's asked for love advice from a girl with whom he's achieved a good atmosphere...

"Could it be— your lover by any chance?"

Ludwik asks, feigning calmness, upon which Florin's eyebrows droop downward before his very eyes. Ahh, this is the usual "that" after all. Crestfallen, Ludwik slumps his shoulders.

(No, I'm a married man myself; I just thought she's cute... It wouldn't hurt to let me dream a little would it...)

Oblivious to Ludwik's complicated sentiments, Florin turns her face down further and further, continuing with the expression of a girl troubled by love problems.

"He's not... my lover. He's my unrequited love who doesn't take me seriously at all. I kept hopes up until the very last minute that he would try to stop me when I was leaving, then that he would come to kidnap me partway through my journey, but it was no good. He wasn't such a showy person to begin with, and whether it be stamina, arm strength, or leg speed, I'm superior to him. Moreover, he's a laggard who finds everything bothersome. If you leave him alone, he won't eat for three or four days at a time nor take a shower... on top of that, he frequently goes missing... That's the kind of person he is, so I knew I couldn't expect anything from him, but, but, I just couldn't give up in the end after all... That's why, when I crossed the border, I made a bet."

"A bet?"

Rather, a man with less stamina than a girl, who treats eating as a bother and often goes missing? Just what kind of person is he?

Ludwik asks while feeling baffled, upon which, Florin formed a gallant expression with her small face.

"That if I continue to love him with an unchanging heart, this love of mine will come true. It's just a bet I arbitrarily made in my own heart though."

Ludwik's heart was squeezed tight by the sadness mixed in her eyes despite her gallant expression.

Ahh, I'm done. If you show me such an earnest, devoted face, I'll end up falling for you.

There should be no way for Florin to know about Ludwik's fluctuating feelings, yet she turned her face down as if to avoid his gaze.

"But because of that, I've ended up causing a lot of trouble for someone... I feel really guilty that that person has had many awful feelings because of me... even so, I was unable to let go of the childish bet I made with myself..."

Florin's voice becomes hoarse, and her lowered eyes behind the mask quiver.

Meanwhile, the pain that strangled Ludwik's heart only keeps increasing.

Again? This pattern again?

A girl who has someone else in mind won't return one's love no matter how much one falls in love with her. After all is said and done, every girl returns to her original lover in the end,

Whispering, "Ludy, you're such a nice guy," with a smile on her face.

Each time that happens, Ludwik endures pain that bursts his heart open, slumping into the darkness.

When Ulrika reconciled with and married her shoemaker lover, Ludwik solemnly swore that he would never do something so stupid as become a "nice guy" again. He wouldn't serve as the confidant for a girl's love troubles, nor would he let himself fall in love with a girl who has someone else in mind or a girl who's engaged.

Yet, why is his heart being drawn towards a girl who is head over heels for another man again?

(I mustn't. I have a wife, and plus, I haven't revealed my true identity to Florin. I mustn't think something like that, despite these things, I can make Florin smile more than the man who's causing her grief.)

It's different from when he was the single young master of a dressmaker.

As the king, Ludwik's love affair would be a major national issue. To make Florin his lover would be to welcome her into the castle as the king's concubine.

When that happens, will I still be able to protect her smile?

Just the contrary, I'd take her smile away from her.

(That's right, I can't let myself be washed away by the atmosphere. I've gotta switch gears.)

Just then, lively music coming from the square was heard.

The dance had begun.

Couples both with and without masks take each other's hand and begin to dance. It looks like great fun.

So as to cheer Florin, who was slumping in low spirits, up, Ludwik says in a sunny voice,

"Look, the dance has started. Let's go to the square and dance with everyone too! You wouldn't know, but I love dancing!"

Florin's body jumps with a start.

She seems to be shaken by Ludwik's words.

"About that... I..."

She muttered in a low voice while grimacing as if in pain.

What's wrong?

Why is she making fists with her hands so tightly, biting her lips, and facing downward?

Because I invited her to dance?

Is it that she's not in the mood to dance right now because she's troubled about the guy she likes? Or is it that Florin, just like Queen Katerina, dislikes dancing?

Ludwik gazes intently at Florin concernedly, upon which,

"Ah!"

As Florin had slowly raised her head timidly, she suddenly opened her eyes

wide and shouted.

“What happened?!”

Ludwik asks in alarm, upon which Florin now begins standing on her tiptoes. She looks past Ludwik’s shoulders, fixating her eyes on one spot.

“That man just kissed a girl.”

“Eh?”

Ludwik turns around and follows Florin’s gaze, upon which he discovers a couple exchanging a thick, deep kiss within the flock of couples whirling round and round.

A golden-haired young man dressed in splendid clothes, with laces along the cuffs and collar of his shirt, has his hands all over his partner, a girl who is similarly wearing a dazzling dress.

(Uwaah)

Ludwik peels his eyes as well.

“F, Florin! I, I didn’t have such lewd things in mind when I said, Let’s dance.”; I genuinely love dancing! I asked because I want to dance with you, not because —”

Ludwik desperately tries to explain himself, upon which Florin reddens slightly,

“No, not that. I’m not suspecting you nor surprised by the kiss. Ah, again!”

The young man’s hand removes the girl’s earring, slipping it into his breast pocket speedily and smoothly, after which again, he unfastens her necklace this time and slips it into his breast pocket.

“That person’s a thief!”

Florin whispers shrilly into Ludwik’s ear.

As turns the entranced girl to

“We’ve gotta chase him.”

Florin says on the spot. Until just now, she was showing a sorrowful and

unreliable expression thinking about her love for a cold, slothful man, yet now, her eyes are full of vigor as if she's a different person.

Seeing Florin suggest that they chase after the thief without any sign of hesitation whatsoever causes Ludwik to panic.

"Ehhhhhhhhhhh?! Let's notify the guards on duty instead!"

That's the normal response, right?

Yet,

"It'll be too late."

She answers flatly, upon which she immediately sets her heels and runs off.

"W, wait! It's dangerous!"

Ludwik calls out as he chases after her, but she doesn't stop.

"Out of the way! Let me through!"

She yells, charging through the flock of couples audaciously like a wild boar. Her skirt waves and her flaxen hair flutters in the wind as she transforms into a reckless girl running dangerously fast through a crowd. Witnessing her power,

"Wah!"

"Kyah, what's going on?!"

The couples vocalize their fright bewilderedly as they get out of the way.

(Uwaah, why is she so motivated!?)

Aren't girls supposed to get scared if they witness a scene of crime? To do the complete opposite and leap into the case herself—

"Pursuing thieves isn't the role of us regular citizens!"

As Ludwik chases after her, continuing to try to persuade her otherwise, the flames burning from the pine torches lining the square and the moonlight pouring from the heavens illuminate Florin as she turns around, fluttering her flaxen hair. She glitters her violet eyes underneath the mask and announces loudly,

"If that's the case, then as of this moment, I'm a special knight who's been

ordered by the king to resolve this incident!”

Her words make Ludwik dizzy.

“That doesn’t count as an order from the king at all!”

He retorts, upon which Florin declares heroically,

“Don’t worry, I won’t let His Majesty complain.”

Chapter 6: Special Knights Face Lots of Danger

“My feet are quick, you know.” It appears that Florin was telling the truth.

With a flying pace, she runs further and further ahead of Ludwik, breaking out of the ring of couples in the blink of an eye as she runs through the crowd on the streets.

“Noela! Firano! (Move! You’re in the way!)”

Florin shouts as she had begun to exhort the pedestrians in Endrish rather than Dahl partway through, parting the crowd into two and charging forward.

She was like a wild, riotous horse or a fearless mountain rabbit. Ludwik was left further and further behind as he tried frantically not to lose sight of the flaxen hair jumping all over the place.

(You’re fast, too fast! Are you a champion sprinter or something!?)

As the clatter of the increasingly faraway festival fades and the number of people on the street thin out, Ludwik pushes his way into the forest chasing after Florin.

“W, wait.”

Luckily, it seems that Florin has never run through a forest before. Thanks to the protruding tree roots and thickets hindering her, Ludwik was finally able to catch up.

He grabs her small hand forcefully as if caught under a spell.

Having her hand suddenly grasped, Florin reddens her face as she complains, “W, what is the matter with you?— I mean, what’s up with you? Doing something like this in the middle of an investigation—”

“I won’t do anything that you might misunderstand, so let me hold onto your hand. Otherwise, you’ll get lost in the forest.”

Ludwik appeals earnestly. Even if it's impossible to stop this noble daughter who's like a wild horse, he's hoping she'll at least let him bridle her. If he admits this out loud, he'll probably be kicked in the face though.

"Uuh"

Florin whimpers, clogging her voice.

"I, I'm not... suspecting anything, really. You're someone who wouldn't lay one finger onto a girl out of respect for her feelings even if you spend a night with her in the same room after all.

"Ehh, I'm not that nice—"

To spend a night with a girl he loves and not have anything happen is impossible. To Ludwik, whose words are clogged in his throat, "But, it's true that I've never gone so deep into a forest before..."

Florin admits as she fidgets bashfully,

"I, I've got it. If you say so, then I'll offer you my hand. I mean, let you hold my hand..."

She says brusquely.

All the while, the golden-haired young man who had stolen the girl's jewelry advances through the forest smoothly with the same ease that he navigated through the crowd with. Ludwik and Florin track him while hiding behind tree trunks and thickets.

"Tracking someone in the forest at night is just like "Paulette the Quick-Eared." Paulette sneaks into the ogre castle deep within the forest all alone, you know?"

Florin whispers next to him with an animated voice. At first, she was feeling shy and timid from holding hands, letting Ludwik do all the work; yet now, she's gripping Ludwik's hand back tightly, and perhaps because she's excited, her hand feels awfully hot.

From the fact that Florin still wasn't scared at all despite coming this far, Ludwik felt his exasperation evolve into awe and even a sense of admiration.

"I'll pray that there isn't an ogre waiting for us ahead."

“We’ll be fine even if that happens. Didn’t I tell you? I’ve escaped hell many times.”

“You’ve encountered an ogre before?”

“Well... only a pet cat that I used to keep back in the castle— I mean, back home. But, his name was ‘Assassin’, and he was a ferocious cat with black fur and silver eyes, you know?”

This is hopeless.

She isn’t a special knight after all; she’s just a naive daughter of some noble!

Eventually, past some black forestry, a brightly lit mansion came into sight.

“Perhaps that’s where the ogres live.”

Finding herself in the same situation as “Paulette the Quick-Eared”, Florin’s eyes suddenly begin to sparkle.

The golden-haired young man with a gentle-looking face heads straight towards the mansion.

Upon which, the shrubbery to the young man’s left and right rustle as three other men reveal themselves.

Two from the left, one from the right.

Including the young man Ludwik and Florin chased after, there are four men in total.

They’re all wearing masks and have golden hair that glitter in the dark night.

As Ludwik and Florin hide behind a thick tree and listen carefully, the golden-haired men greet each other familiarly.

“Oi, how did you do?”

“A big catch, as one would expect.”

“I got my hands on plenty as well. Looks like this golden-haired wig did work.”

“After all, it was rumored that King Ludwik would secretly come to the festival. The girls would all lose themselves in a daze upon seeing a young man with golden hair dressed in noble wear.”

“Long live His Majesty.”

They say to each other as they enter the mansion.

(My goodness. They stole jewelry from women while pretending to be me?)

If Adelheid finds out, she'll rebuke, “That's why I told Sire not to sneak away to town anymore, yet—”. As Ludwik begins to feel gloomy considering that, “It's His Majesty's fault for fooling around with a flower girl then returning to the castle beyond cloud nine the next day. Because he deliberately told everyone that he had a wonderful encounter the night before, the girls ended up getting all excited thinking that that means they have a chance too. Living with such a cold queen must be very stressful, s, so I can understand having an urge to cut loose, but His Majesty is too lacking in judgment.”

Florin grumbles spitefully.

Ludwik is startled because Florin's voice sounded just like Queen Katerina's voice when she throws sharp words at him. Ludwik reflexively opens his mouth to try to defend himself— However, he is frightened in a different way as Florin quickly lets go of his hand and speedily approaches the mansion.

(Uwahhhh, wait up, if you run so fast, you'll—! Ah, ah, you're already all the way over there.) Florin appears to be searching for a window to see if she can peek inside. As Ludwik's heart rings like an alarm, he catches up to Florin and pulls her into the shadow of the mansion with his hand.

“Let's go back now. We can just report this place to the guards on duty.”

“No, we must acquire more decisive evidence.”

Florin unties herself from Ludwik's hand and, would you believe it, begins to climb a large tree next to the mansion!

The edge of one of the branches is right next to a second-floor window.

“Climbing trees is a special skill of mine.”

She professes, and while Ludwik blinks his eyes repeatedly in disbelief, really does manage to climb up all the way, after which she crawls on her target branch until she was near its edge as it creaks.

Then, she daringly extends her head up to the window and peeks inside.

“We did it. They’re talking in the adjacent room. Lucky us.”

She mutters something that makes Ludwik’s heart pound pit-a-pat.

(Doesn’t that mean it’s extremely risky!?)

However, Florin doesn’t seem to think she’s in any danger at all as she cautiously shuffles herself forward a little more and extends her head up to the window again, straining her eyes through her mask.

“There are seven guys in total. Ah, they took off their masks.”

“Florin, come down. Let’s go back.”

Any more than this is truly a bad idea.

If they’re assaulted by seven thieves at once, a sheltered girl like Florin and a guy like Ludwik, who used to specialize in customer service at a dressmaker, have no chance of winning.

“I can’t see their faces very well from here. Grr, even though it’s a great opportunity with them taking their wigs off and relaxing.”

Becoming impatient, Florin crawls forward even more to the very edge of the branch, upon which Above Ludwik’s head, a snap sounds.

“Eh?”

Florin opens her eyes wide.

The next moment, the branch breaks off, causing Florin to fall with it.

“Kyahhhhh!”

“Uwahhhhh!”

Florin’s shriek and Ludwik’s cry overlap each other.

Ludwik extends his arms out, trying to catch Florin with his entire being. He successfully does so, but, unable to withstand the impact fully, falls on his butt while holding her in his arms before fully collapsing back onto the grass.

“Are you okay!? Ludy!”

The fall hurt Ludwik’s waist. Ludwik groans “urgh” in pain before managing to say, “More importantly, we’ve gotta get out of here, or—”

Before he could finish speaking, the band of thieves had come running out of the mansion upon hearing their screams.

Just as Florin said, there are seven men in total. As they have removed their masks, their fiendish faces are on full display. They look laughably ill-suited for the frilly and gaudy noble wear they have on.

However, the two of them certainly didn't have the time to laugh.

"Who are you two?!"

The fiendish men cautiously approach the two of them who remain stuck on the ground.

It's a life-or-death situation!

Ludwik's heart is pounding so hard he feels like it'll pierce his rib cage and break out of his body. More than himself, he strongly feels that he needs to protect Florin, who's biting her lips tightly with a pale face next to him.

Because Florin's a girl, and he's a man.

If he can't protect a girl he has feelings for when it counts, how can he call himself a man?

Adelheid had said that women's hearts skip a beat when they learn of talents men have that they didn't expect.

Unfortunately, Ludwik is neither secretly a master swordsman nor a skilled brawler.

My special skill is—

Ludwik displays a business smile that he cultivated during his time as the young master of a dressmaker.

"Good evening."

Refreshingly— yet also respectfully, Ludwik smiles at the thieves and addresses them with a cheerful voice.

Receiving an affectionate greeting unbecoming of the situation, the thieves stare blankly at Ludwik. Florin is also staring up at Ludwik with her eyes open wide.

Ludwik helps Florin up with a natural-looking gesture and nonchalantly positions himself in front of her while surveying the group of thieves with a smile. He discovers a young man among them wearing well-tailored, fine clothes.

The other men's clothes look gaudy, but upon a closer look the cloth is of poor quality and the seams are loose here and there. These are proof that the sewing was done crudely. However, the tawny-haired young man's clothes are different; both the quality and design are first-class.

Ludwik leans his head forward towards that young man with a full smile on his face.

"Uwahh, that shirt is sewn with silk made in Miltoria isn't it! Miltorian silk is exclusively screen two times over in production and is the best silk one can get. Miltoria only exports a tiny amount of it, so I rarely ever get to see it, but as expected, its polish is simply on another level!

"Oh, right... I'm surprised you can tell. This shirt was made from Miltorian silk that I had specially ordered."

The tawny-haired young man is drawn into the conversation.

"Your coat has Golg needlework, and I see that your pants are from the purveyor of luxury clothing that caters to nobles, Shiluria."

You're exactly right, and my shoes are a one-of-a-kind item from the shoe store Régál, made inhouse in their famous workshop.

"Régál, the shoe store dubbed the Shoemaker of the Gods!? And, you're wearing their shoes perfectly with such grace too! I'm amazed, it's truly a sight to behold!

"We—ll, I figured that if I'm going to assemble a set of top-notch clothes, my shoes would have to match as well."

Just as Ludwik discerned, the tawny-haired young man is fastidious and confident about his fashion. The young man is seemingly in a thoroughly good mood, as he even lifts his feet up to show Ludwik his shoes.

However, there's no way that the other thieves would just stay quiet.

“Oi, so what are you doing here in the end?”

“You’re not going to tell us you came this deep into the forest to discuss fashion are you?”

They say with precipitous voices.

“Of course not! She and I came to this mansion for a very important business.”

Ludwik replied in an earnest voice without a moment’s delay.

“You see—!”

Ludwik makes a serious, focused face, upon which the thieves all lean forward in anticipation.

“Our father left us an inheritance hidden somewhere in this mansion!”

“Hahh?”

“The hell are you talking about?”

Towards the thieves looking at him with eyes full of suspicion, Ludwik nods in a broad motion as if to say, “I know what you’re all thinking.”

“Both my sister Katie and I couldn’t believe it as well. However, our father’s will clearly states that there are ten thousand Dahl gold coins hidden in this mansion. Katie, show everyone the coins.”

Ludwik turned toward Florin, who had her mouth open with a dumbfounded look, but upon Ludwik reaching out his hand, she took out a gold coin from her small silk bag and placed it on Ludwik’s hand.

“There are ten thousand of these somewhere here—”

Ludwik holds the gold coin between his thumb and index finger and shoves it in the thieves’ faces.

Of the coinage used universally throughout the continent, the one of the finest quality and worth the most, the Dahl coin made of one-hundred percent pure gold glitters in the moonlight.

The thieves’ faces

“Oi, this is the real thing!”

“There are more of these in this mansion?”

Ludwik nods even deeper.

“Correct, ten thousand in total.”

It’s a sum big enough to let everyone present live the rest of his life in luxury.

“Where in the mansion is it?”

“That’s what we were investigating.”

“And? Did you find it?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

The thieves stick their heads forward.

Ludwik grins sweetly,

“It’s where this—”

He says, lifting his arm straight up so as to make a display of the glittering Dahl gold coin.

“—gold coin lands.”

He finishes, throwing the coin forward as far as he could.

“!”

The glittering gold coin traces a parabola as it cuts through the air before landing between a dense group of trees by the back of the mansion.

The thieves reflexively run towards that direction.

Ludwik grabs Florin’s hand and begins running in the opposite direction.

Shortly afterward, he lets go of her hand and yells,

“You’re faster than me, go on ahead!”

“I refuse!”

Florin takes his hand back, gripping it strongly.

Realizing that the two of them have run away, the thieves come chasing after them. Ludwik ran through the night forest with all his being while holding onto Florin's hand.



Fortunately for them, the clouds begin to cover the moon, thickening the darkness of the night.

If they can blend into the darkness and lose the thieves—

However, the thieves' voices continue to press closer.

Faster! I have to run faster!

Once they make it out of the forests, they'll arrive at a road where there'll be people passing by. Due to the festival, there are more guards on duty patrolling than usual as well, so they may be able to find one.

Ludwik's breath is running out, and his heart is pounding against his rib cage.

The small hand he's grasping tightly onto is blazing hot.

Even though Florin could run away much faster alone... As Ludwik grinds his teeth lamenting how slow and weak he is, "Kyah!"

Florin screams.

It seems she stumbled on the root of a tree.

Her delicate body began to fall away from Ludwik.

"Florin!"

Ludwik, who tried to stop her by pull her back, also ended up losing his footing, causing the two of them to fall forward.

"Uwahh"

"Kyahh"

Their voices overlap as they flop onto the grass on top of each other and roll freely downhill until they hit a thicket, which began to brake their motion.

Small leaves and twigs rustle as they scrape against Ludwik's face and arms. Ludwik wraps his arms tightly around Florin so as to shield her. Florin's small face is pressed against his chest right above his heart.

Right after they finally stop rolling,

"Where'd they go?!"

"I heard a voice just now!"

The thieves' footsteps and voices rang close by.

Florin's body stiffens.

As if to say, "Don't worry, I'm here." in encouragement, Ludwik hugs Florin tighter in response.

The moon is still hidden by the clouds.

The forest that they can faintly see through a gap in the thicket is pitch black. The thieves' footsteps and their violent voices can be heard clearly.

"Fuck, those two brats are quick."

"Let's see if they're over there."

"Rather, the ones left behind looking for where the gold coin landed better not be thinking of splitting the treasure among themselves without us."

"Yeah, I can see them doing that. Let's search around just a little longer then hurry on back."

"Yeah, it's not like those little punks can do anything to us anyway."

"After all, we have——— behind us after all."

The sound of the thieves' voices begin to fade away.

Ludwik had held his breath while holding Florin tightly against him as he had listened to their exchange.

Florin didn't move an inch as she rolled herself up into a ball as tightly as possible in Ludwik's arms. Florin's body feels delicate and terribly soft, and her face right above Ludwik's heart feels hot just like her hand that he had held onto until they fell.

Her slender legs are entangled with his own.

Is this elegant and pleasant fragrance mixed with the scent of leaves coming from Florin's nape and hair?

I feel like I've smelled this same fragrance somewhere before... perhaps it's a fragrance that's popular among the girls right now.

(It's very... pleasant.)

Even though they're not out of the woods yet, just taking in that fragrance is making Ludwik relax.

That Florin is entrusting herself fully to him, staying completely still in his arms made Ludwik drunk with powerful feelings of love.

As he ruminated over how, when he told her to go on ahead and let go of her hand, Florin said, “I refuse.” and took his hand back, Ludwik felt like his throbbing heart was being filled with thick, sweet syrup— Even after the sound of the thieves’ footsteps were completely gone, Ludwik continued to embrace Florin.

Who knows how much time had passed, before—

“Ludy... are you alive?”

Florin, who was still clinging onto Ludwik, muttered apprehensively.

“Yeah, I’m alive.”

Ludwik answers with a serene voice, upon which she let out a sigh as if relieved.

Ludwik crawled out of the thicket first while keeping his eyes out. After confirming that the coast is clear, he let Florin know and gently helped her up as she came out of the thicket.

Florin’s mask is a bit askew, sliding down her face to one side.

Ludwik discreetly adjusts her mask for her, upon which Florin nervously trembles her shoulders slightly. Because the darkness is thick right now as the moon is being covered by the clouds, Ludwik couldn’t discern her face clearly when her mask was askew, but it seemed like she has an elegant, beautiful face.

Along with the color of her eyes, that her facial features and tone of voice seem to resemble Queen Katerina must be because they’re both from the Northern Empire.

Although, Queen Katerina probably wouldn’t chase after thieves and climb trees to peek into their hideout.

Ludwik began to worry that once the clouds disperse, letting the moonlight through, the thieves might find them, upon which cold sweat began to run down his back anew.

Even after he had adjusted her mask, Florin continued fidgeting with her head down. Maybe she’s still nervous.

“Are you okay? Does it hurt anywhere?”

Ludwik inquires, upon which, looking a little embarrassed,

“I’m fine.”

She replies curtly.

“Let’s go then.”

Ludwik offers her his hand, upon which she wriggles a little again as she grasps his hand tightly, causing Ludwik’s chest to grow hot once again.

So that Florin wouldn’t stumble over any tree roots or rocks or be scratched by any twigs, Ludwik walks just a little in front as the two of them advance through the pitch dark forest.

Even though when they came, Ludwik was the one frantically trying to stop Florin who was charging forward like a wild horse recklessly, now, he’s the one leading Florin as they take their time walking discreetly through the forest.

That Florin is someone dear to him that he must protect is a sentiment that has been vibrating within Ludwik’s heart since when he voluntarily confronted the band of thieves.

Eventually, they finally make it out of the forest and onto a road.

When the moon which had been covered by the clouds once again began to illuminate the ground— A young woman dressed in a knight’s uniform approached from the opposite side on horseback.

Looking dignified with her hair tied into a ponytail on top of the back of her head— she’s the female knight that tumbled down in front of Ludwik’s carriage during the coronation parade!

Ludwik had heard that her name is Evelyn.

He sees her from time to time within the castle as well. When Ludwik would greet her, saying, “Hey there, thanks for your hard work”, she would abruptly straighten her back with a beet red face.

“G-good morning! Your Majesty.”

She would reply in a shrill voice.

It’d be bad if she recognizes me, but we’re still lucky that she just happens to

be passing by.

With a voice purposefully deeper than usual,

“Miss, there’s a band of thieves hiding in a mansion in this forest.”

He stops her and explains the situation, upon which

“What! They must be the perpetrators of the thefts that the girls at the festival were reporting! I’m sorry, but could you two come to the main office of the guards with me?”

She said, after which she briskly guided the two of them to the main office of the guards, seeming not to notice that Ludwik is the king. Though Ludwik had thought that she seemed unreliable from the fiasco at the parade, seeing her gallantly take charge and do her job with zeal made Ludwik reevaluate.

In the main office located in the town, the girls who were victims of theft at the festival were demanding that the guards hurry in finding the thieves and returning their lost jewelry.

“My treasured pearl necklace was taken from me!”

“Get me my earring back!”

“Even though he was a young man with blond hair, so I was certain he was His Majesty!”

They strain their voices simultaneously.

The one that particularly stood out even among the flashy bunch was a young woman with curled, ruby red hair wearing an extravagant dress and a mask embedded with a gemstone.

“That diamond ring is our family treasure! It’s an item with rich history that most of the mediocre jewelry out there can’t even hope to compare to, do you understand?!”

The girl presses the guards for an answer.

As soon as Evelyn saw her,

“Ahhh!”

She shouted.

The young woman with red hair turned around with a start, upon which

“You’re the daughter of Duke Folma, The—”

Evelyn begins to say but is charged at with frightening speed and has her mouth sealed by the palm of the girl’s extended hand.

“What are you saying, I wonder? I’ve never met someone from an upstart family like you even once in my life before. Nor am I related in any way to the family of a duke.

“Cough, cough.”

Evelyn glares at the red-haired girl as she tries to shake off the girl’s hand. In response, the red-haired girl presses down even harder on Evelyn’s mouth as if to say, “I won’t let you.”

As the two unfolded a battle of offense and defense, Ludwik and Florin were sent to another room.

There, Ludwik and Florin were asked about the band of thieves and their hideout mansion by the commanding officer of the guards.

“Please describe their features as best you can.”

“Could I borrow a pencil and some paper?”

Ludwik is handed paper and a pencil as requested, upon which he quickly and fluently sketches each of the thieves’ faces one after the other, upon which the guards start to stir, inadvertently gasping “Ooohh.” in amazement.

Each time Ludwik finished a sketch,

“Oi, isn’t that Sheeta the Swindler?”

“This here is Gustaf the Pickpocket.”

The guards exclaim one after the other.

When Ludwik finished his last sketch, the one of the young man dressed in posh clothes, “T-this is!”

The commanding officer exclaimed as his face turned pale.

He gulped, and opening his mouth hesitantly,

“This looks somewhat like... the third son of the merchant Elmond. No, it’s his spitting image.”

He groaned.

Speaking of Elmond, he’s the wealthy merchant who’s been cozying up to Duke Walter, a powerful duke who’s displeased that Ludwik ascended the throne. Adelheid did mention before that Elmond had been gaining influence lately.

So the wealthy merchant’s third son is a member of a band of thieves?

(Now that I think about it, the thieves who chased after us said something like that they have a big wig behind them.) Though he couldn’t catch the name that they said, that name might have been Elmond. It’d be no laughing matter if Elmond’s been gaining influence from secretly being in bed with criminals.

The commanding officer and his subordinates all suddenly have a complicated look on their faces, “Elmond is close to Duke Walter. If we arrest Elmond’s son and it turns out to have been a mistake...”

“What should we do, captain? If an important person is involved, we can’t easily take action at our own discretion.”

“Dammit, even though we even have a sketch as proof.”

The guards’ voices are filled with bitterness.

Ludwik opens his mouth,

“Please dispatch soldiers to the forest immediately.”

Florin, who had been looking vexed next to Ludwik, looks up at him with an expression of astonishment.

The guard officers also begin staring at Ludwik all at once.

Returning their gazes with a composed look in his eyes, Ludwik said,

“Elmond will surely rely on Duke Walter. To Duke Walter, Elmond is an important source of funding, so it’s very likely that he’ll try to cover things up for Elmond. However, when that happens—”

Facing the officers who are listening attentively with a perplexed look on their

faces, Ludwik declares in a refreshingly cool voice, “King Ludwik will intervene.”

Florin gulps down a tiny breath, and the guards open their eyes wide as well.

Ludwik slackens his mouth,

“If something happens, please talk to Adelheid, the grand chamberlain. She’ll definitely hear you out.”

Adelheid will gladly turn the gears in her head if there’s an opportunity to reduce Duke Walter’s power.

The captain inquires with a choked voice,

“J, just who are... that golden hair and those green eyes... don’t tell me—”

Ludwik takes Florin’s hand.

Florin blushes as she gracefully curls the fingers of her white hand around Ludwik’s.

After which, the two turn toward the officers, who are being overwhelmed by the noble aura they’re exuding. Ludwik announces in a bright, ringing voice, “We’re the king’s special knights.”

Epilogue 1: Florin's Secret

Leaving the officers and Evelyn and the red-haired daughter of some noble, who were still arguing, "You're Duke Folma's daughter." "You're mistaking me for someone else." behind, Ludwik and Florin raise their voices in laughter as they run out onto the festival streets.

They hold each other's hand tightly together and both look to be having lots of fun.

"Ahahahaha, we did it! That band of thieves is done for!"

"It's mission complete for the special knights! I feel so good, just like how I felt when Paulette eradicated all the ogres!"

"I feel great too!"

Ludwik was finally able to do something king-like for the first time.

He had been languishing in apathy, thinking that stamping the royal seal onto documents and smiling at balls and parades are all that kings do.

However, there are things that only the king can do as well.

(I've gotta tell Adelheid about the situation and have her assist the guards. I feel like I'm boiling with energy right now. This is all thanks to Florin chasing after that thief.) Ludwik was quite rattled back then, but thanks to her actions, Elmond's dirty dealings will be exposed.

(You're the best, Florin!)

Running senselessly through the streets at night without any destination in mind, they laugh with each other from the bottom of their lungs. Their heads feel completely refreshed, their hearts are pounding passionately, and their cheeks are flushed a burning-hot red.

Running and running, laughing and laughing.

Illuminated by the crystal clear moonlight on an otherwise dark and lonely

street, they face each other and exchange smiles again as they pant for air. Florin's cheeks are dancing with life and her eyes underneath the mask are glittering like the stars.

The sound of cheerful music can be heard from faraway. It appears that the dance at the square hasn't ended.

Florin breaks into a smile with her lovely lips as she looks up at Ludwik. She extends her pure white hand toward him and says with an exuberant smile, "Let's dance! I love dancing!"

Her bright and cheery voice bounces against the walls of Ludwik's heart. Ludwik takes Florin's beautiful, flawlessly smooth hand and the two begin to dance.

Covered in a new pair of leather shoes, Florin's dainty feet spin around with ease. She dances with steps as light as a feather in Ludwik's arms. When she had hesitated upon Ludwik inviting her to dance back at the square, Ludwik had thought that maybe Florin dislikes dancing.

Yet, she's laughing so innocently and dancing with such life!

Every time the hem of her skirt expands airily, her pale feet jumps like a fawn as her slender body bends tenderly, teasingly leaning in towards Ludwik then away from him. She looks up and smiles at Ludwik with her charming eyes.

However, no sooner does she do that before she narrows her eyes with a sad tinge, "Your face has gotten all scratched up again. I'm sorry."

She apologizes with a regretful voice.

(She's probably referring to the scratches I got when we rolled right into the thicket while running away from the thieves. Compared to when I was scratched by Kiki, this is nothing at all.) Ludwik smiles brightly,

"Your face is fair, Florin."

"It's because you protected me. You were really courageous, Ludy."

Perhaps she recalled how her feet had been entangled with his and how she had held her breath with him inside his arms considering that her face is currently flushing red.

Likewise, Ludwik's cheeks and chest become hot and his heart also begins beating faster.

"I'm a man, so I believed that I had to protect you."

He confesses, upon which Florin sweetly smiles,

"Yes. You protected me well, Ludy."

She whispers.

"You caught me when I fell from the tree, and you managed to brazenly sell such a preposterous story when we were found by the thieves with nowhere to hide. I thought you were a meek and unreliable softie, so I was worried you'd be tricked by others. Yet, you were like a different person back there. I was shocked."

"Don't you think too lowly of me? Despite the fact that we just met today, do I look that unreliable to you?"

"I, I know someone who resembles you. I mean, I know someone like you. That person is unreliable and gets flustered easily, so I figured you were the same... but you were really dashing when you fooled the thieves. Also, when you announced that we're the king's special knights to the guards."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, my heart was beating pit-a-pat."

As Florin spun around, her soft, flaxen hair would graze against Ludwik's cheek, giving off an elegant, sweet scent— And when she completed a twirl, she would smile at Ludwik with a face as if she were lost in a world with only the two of them, causing Ludwik's heart to pitter-patter titter-tatter.

"Ah... sorry for throwing your gold coin away. I'll tell the guards and definitely have them retrieve it for you."

Florin shakes her head politely,

"No, it's fine."

"But—"

"To begin with, that's something I was going to pay you."

“I can’t give you enough change to accept it, Florin.”

“No, you’ve given me more than enough. You went on an adventure with me where you protected me in a manly way, no? It’s the first time I’ve had so much fun and excitement since I came to this country.”

Illuminated by the clear, bluish moonlight, Florin’s straightforward smile makes Ludwik’s heart beat faster.

(It’s the same for me, Florin. It’s the first time I’ve had so much fun and excitement since I became king. You took me on an adventure with you and are now dancing with me together like this.) —I love dancing!

Recalling her sunny smile when she looked up at him and said that, Ludwik’s heart begins to melt.

(Isn’t it fate that I encountered Florin tonight?)

The young girl with blue hair had said that Ludwik shall attain everything he wants except just one.

That he shall part with the Seventh, but that the First to the Sixth shall stay by his side.

Then, what about Florin?

If I wish for it, will Florin stay by my side?

Will she love me back?

Would she be willing to become my lover?

Finding himself in a romantic situation like this right after their adventure, the feelings that Ludwik had suppressed within his heart, believing that he can’t wish for such a thing as the king, steadily continue to surface in the forefront of his mind.

—So, Ludy; when you dance, do so as if you’re the king and your partner’s the queen.

(If Florin is willing to become my queen not just for tonight but beyond as well, I feel like I’d be able to do anything.) Ludwik gazed sweetly upon Florin who was skipping about innocently. When she began to rush, he would

nonchalantly bring her back to tempo, leading her gently. As they continued to dance, Ludwik's feelings reached their boiling point.

—If you do that, the girl who dances with you will fall in love with you.

Right now, Florin is gazing up into Ludwik's eyes with a smile that seems to be melting.

“Your dance is very wonderful, Ludy.”

(If Florin has fallen for me as I have for her... She's looking at me with such enamored eyes, so she, too, must...) Above them, the moon is covered by a thin cloud.

As if that was the cue,

Ludwik brought his face close to Florin's, pressing his own lips against hers, upon which Florin's lips quivered. Florin's shock is felt by Ludwik on his lips.

Ludwik gently parts his lips from hers, upon which Florin looks up at him.

As if to say that something out of control just happened, she murmurs with dumbfounded eyes, “Toris karlmaella... diino (What, have you... done)”

Ludwik couldn't clearly tell how Florin felt about his sudden kiss from the disjointed words she barely managed to squeeze out.

Ludwik initiates seriously,

“Florin, I want to learn more about you; not just that, I want to always be together with you. Won't you become my lover?”

Ludwik already has a wife in Queen Katerina.

From a political standpoint, he can't afford to divorce her.

However, if Florin agrees to come to the castle as the king's beloved concubine, then Ludwik will take responsibility as a man and protect her. He'll do whatever it takes to persuade his chief retainers as well. Then, they'll be able to be together forever.

In the morning, noon, and at night, he'll be able to dance with this cheerful tomboy, this lovable girl whom one can never predict what she'll do next.

“...I...? Become, your lover?”

Florin's voice is as faint as a ghost.

If he abruptly confesses here that he's the king, it'll only put her mind into chaos. He can just tell her about that slowly, bit-by-bit after their bond has deepened further.

Right now, he just wants a promise that he'll be able to meet her again after tonight.

He knows that Florin has someone else in mind already. Precisely because of that, so as not to fill the role of a love counselor again, now, at this point in time — he declared his intentions.

"Y... you have someone else already, don't you? Right, like the flower girl whom you spent a wonderful night with."

"Like I've been saying, I don't have anyone like that. If I did, it'd be you, Florin. Spending tonight with you, I felt that you're my fated partner."

Florin's throat gets clogged.

Ludwik whispers in the words of Florin's homeland, the Empire of the North.

"Rui elma amalose (Please accept my love.)"

Florin's white fingers grip the cloth of her skirt tightly. She bites her pink lips and faces downward.

She remained silent like that for awhile, but eventually her throat starts to tremble as she lifts her face, fixing onto Ludwik's eyes with her own that look like they're about to cry, and emphatically pushes him away with both of her hands against his chest.

"Este romena krutose! Vaine luge! Elflorre! Inferdia! Rotersia mertina! Elblouge! Boruboruboru!"

Furrowing her eyebrows and intensifying her face, she yells determinedly in Endrish.

She's speaking too rapidly for Ludwik to understand what she's saying.

The one thing that is keenly conveyed by Florin's expression and voice is that she's sad and distressed right now.

“Speak a little slower, Florin.”

Ludwik pleads her earnestly so as to be able to follow what she says somehow.

“Boru! Boruboru!”

What does the word “boru”, which Florin keeps repeating, mean?

Wanting to understand her feelings, Ludwik tries his damndest scouring his memory for a definition, but nothing comes to mind.

Florin shakes her head left and right so powerfully that her flaxen hair dances up into the air, after which she turns her back on Ludwik and breaks into a run.

“Florin! If you like me even a little bit, please pay a visit to Boris’s Dressmaker on Red Deer Street!”

Ludwik yells with all he has, but Florin, whose flaxen hair is swinging roughly from side to side, does not look back.

Epilogue 2: The Queen's Secret

(Was it because I suddenly kissed her after all...)

At dawn, Ludwik, who had returned to the castle, was dragging his feet, which felt heavy, through the corridors.

(I guess I should have spent more time trying to get her to like me and trust me more first.) But, when they were dancing, Florin looked like she was having a blast. Moreover, her eyes that looked up at Ludwik seemed like they would melt and her lips were opened slightly as if awaiting a kiss.

If you look at me with such a face, it's only natural to think that the feelings are mutual...

(Will Florin come meet me again?)

Ludwik had told her to visit his stepfather's dressmaker, but did she hear him back then? Will she come?

(I wonder what Florin was saying in Endrish back then.)

He finally arrived at his bedroom; in truth, he wanted to collapse onto his bed immediately and sleep, but he resisted and flipped through his Endrish dictionary instead.

That Florin looked like she was about to cry also bothered him.

(Maybe there was a reason for that. Right, like the lazy man who's completely uninterested in her that she has an unrequited love for.) As he recalled Florin's words, he looked up the definitions one by one and assemble the words into sentences.

"Let's see... Este... romena... was what she said."

"You philanderer!"

"—Eh?"

Ludwik, left speechless, double checks to make sure he didn't match the

wrong definition.

“Please go die once over! You big, lying swindler!”

Ludwik thinks, “This has to be wrong.” and checks the dictionary over and over again. Even though he desperately looks for similar-sounding words, he simply can’t find any that would form a coherent sentence.

“Someone like you should just go to hell!”

Ludwik is unable to take his eyes away from the extreme words listed in the dictionary.

“I don’t want to see your face ever again!”

In the end, he looked up the word “boru” which Florin had repeated several times, and was left even more astounded.

“Stupid stupid stupid stupid!”

“What is this?!”

Far from there being any hope, he was completely despised and rejected.

As he opened his mouth in a daze with his eyes still on the dictionary— A banging sound was heard by his window.

Turning around, Ludwik flinches before opening his eyes wide.

“I”

There’s a girl clinging to his window! Not just any girl either, but the one who just now thrust Ludwik off the cliff of broken love, the one who had left him back in town, Florin!

(Why is Florin in the castle? Am I hallucinating from the shock of being rejected?) Upon meeting Ludwik’s eyes, Florin becomes flustered and tries to get away from the window. Doing so, it seems either a hand or foot slipped, and “Kyah—”

She chirps in a tiny voice.

Florin falls but grabs onto the outer ledge of the window as her delicate body shakes violently.

Ludwik rushes to the window and opens it, grasping onto Florin beneath her arms and pulling her into the room.

(It's not a hallucination! She's warm, and I can touch her with my hands!) As Ludwik's heartbeat was disrupted to the point that he thought his heart had flipped upside-down, he landed on his butt onto the floor with Florin in his arms.

At that moment, Florin's flaxen hair tangled onto the button on Ludwik's shirt and was pulled forcefully.

Florin's hair slips off halfway.

(Eh?)

The first rays of sunlight shined down from the sky and bounced off the golden hair like the color of melted gold bunched up under the flaxen hair.

"Noa! (No!)"

Florin hurriedly tries to adjust the flaxen hair, but her mask had fallen off halfway as well, revealing her violet eyes adorned with long, golden eyelashes and the elegant form of her face. Unlike during the festival at night, Ludwik's eyes perceive her face literally as clear as day.

"!"

That he lost his breath is because Florin, whose eyes were jumping about flusteredly, looks just like Queen Katerina.

He had thought that the color of their eyes are the same, and that their figures and voices are similar too.

However, he had accepted that as due to them both hailing from Endra.

In the first place, Queen Katerina's and Florin's expressions and aura are divergent enough to be considered antipodes of one another.

However, there's just no way.

Even at this stage, unable to discard the feeble hope that this is some sort of mistake, Ludwik asks fearfully, "Florin, could you actually be... Queen Katerina?"

Florin, who has been grappling' with the flaxen hair stuck on the button of Ludwik's shirt, flushes her face reeeeeeeed as a tomato.



The mask which has slipped off more than halfway now, revealing a face that is unquestionably Queen Katerina's.

Ludwik wavers, being lost in turmoil as well.

“What, are you serious—!? Is Florin really the queen? The Florin who was flustered upon having her gold coin rejected by the food stand? The Florin who

licked her fingers looking embarrassed after getting them sticky from eating candy? The Florin who boasted that she has a wealth of life experiences and had survived hell several times over? The Florin who suddenly chased after a thief? The Florin who fell off a branch after saying her specialty is climbing trees? You're telling me that Florin is Queen Katerina!?"

Each time Ludwik confirms a detail, Florin— Queen Katerina, rather, becomes redder and redder, shoving her flaxen wig against Ludwik's chest with one hand and removing the mask from her face before throwing it against the ground and yelling, looking vexed and mortified.

"That's right, I'm Florin, and? It seems you remember nothing about me but my embarrassing sides, huh, Ludy'!"

"I can't believe it..."

Ludwik mutters with his eyes still wide open.

"After all, don't you hate dancing?"

Yes, she definitely did say that. "I hate dancing," she had said clearly in a chilly voice.

It looks like Queen Katerina caught a lump in her throat again. She casts her eyes downward as if feeling guilty and pinches her skirt with her fingertips as she twirls it one way then the other repetitively, before eventually saying, looking resigned, "I'm sorry."



After Ludwik closed the window and they sat down on the sofa together, Queen Katerina shrank her shoulders inward as she began to explain "the circumstances".

"I told you that there's someone I've set my heart on, didn't I? Since I was a child, I couldn't imagine becoming anyone's bride but his, so I rejected every single marriage proposal that my father brought to me."

"I would do things like identifying my father's new lover and threatening to disclose it to a newspaper, threatening to shear off all the fur of the prime minister's boasted horse that had a golden mane, and investigating the small

improprieties of the cabinet ministers and threatening to expose them— Doing so, I successfully broke off every engagement. I also made plans to have the sacred temple declare a divination that it is my fate to be wed to that person, and that our marriage is tied intricately with the continued prosperity of our country. Because that person lived in the outer palace, I also spent a lot of effort to commute to his room every night, making my way across on roofs and through windows every night while hiding from the eyes of the guards.”

Weren't you spending your efforts in the wrong places...

The imperial princess of a country threatening its emperor and retainers... Furthermore, trespassing onto roofs and through windows... Weren't you supposed to be a proper princess of high blood?

In front of Ludwik, who couldn't come up with any suitable comment, Queen Katerina casts her eyes down despondently and tugs her shoulders in. Despite feeling guilty about it, Ludwik couldn't help but think that her gesture just now was adorable.

“But, it seemed like I worked a little too hard... I was told by Father that if he leaves me in the country, he won't be able to tell when my wild actions will defile the honor of the imperial household again, so he's going to marry me off to a faraway country where my infamous reputation had yet to reach. However, at the time I thought this was actually a hidden opportunity.”

Considering how much havoc she caused, Ludwik feels like he can understand the feelings of her father, the emperor, in marrying her off to a faraway country.

“...Why?”

Ludwik mutters, upon which

“I was hoping that, if I'm going to go off somewhere so far away, even that person who finds everything bothersome may stop me.”

Queen Katerina answers.

“...So he didn't stop you.”

“Uguh”

Queen Katerina clogs her throat with an unladylike whimper and shrinks her body despondently again. However, she quickly recovers, making a tight fist with one hand and raising it up.

“That’s not true, he might still come to pick me up in the future. That’s right, you can’t tell yet. After all, the one who told me that Rhodesia is the nation of stories is that person, and he also told me that he’s always wanted to compile an anthology of Rhodesian stories. Thus, he might come chasing after me to Rhodesia and take me away like in a romantic fairy tale. Indeed, I’m not going to give up hope.”

She proposes then asserts.

After which, shrinking again, she confesses,

“That’s why... there was no way I could consummate the marriage with the King of Rhodesia.”

Princess Katerina had calculated that if she pulls the same unprecedented stunts in Rhodesia as back home, the groom would probably break off the engagement. However, she found out she couldn’t afford to do so.

As for why, it’s because she was told before she departed by her father, the emperor, with a face as serious as could be, that if she does anything to damage the reputation of the Endrish Empire in Rhodesia, he would forcefully summon her back and lock her up in the palace dungeon for the rest of her life.

The idea of having her ties with her father severed caused Princess Katerina to shrink more than being threatened to be exiled out of the country.

“Father said that, though he would have my attendants return to Endra after the wedding so that I would get used to Rhodesia faster, he would have an informant secretly stay behind to observe me, so that I had better watch myself.”

(To think there’s actually a daughter who threatens and is in turn threatened in reverse by her father...) “Isn’t how he purposefully told me that he would have someone secretly watch me a nasty touch? Even though there might not actually be a secret observer, he’s taking into account that I would be worried about whether there is one or not. After all, if there really is one, I’d be doomed

to the palace dungeon if I cause a commotion. To demonstrate that I'm unfit to be Rhodesia's queen without damaging the Endrish Imperial Family's reputation, my only recourse was to become a cold and haughty, detestable woman. See, my face looks perfectly proportioned to the point that that it looks eerie and cold like a doll, right? Everyone in my family looks like this. When we all gather in one place, we look like an evil family of despots. I've always had a complex about my doll-like face, but, I was thankful for it for the first time in my life. If I could use it to successfully play the part of an arrogant princess, I thought that I might be able to get your retainers to pity you for having a such a wife and ultimately return me to my homeland."

"We're not talking about goods here so we can't return you. In the first place, your country is far more powerful and influential than mine, so we wouldn't have the authority to do so even if we wanted to."

"...You're right. I'm sorry."

Queen Katerina casts her eyes down and apologizes weakly.

The reason she cried on the night of the wedding is because that was something she absolutely did not want to do with anyone but her beloved.

As Ludwik feels a piercing pain in his chest,

"Was your polite speech also part of your act? Is this how you normally speak?"

He asks, upon which Queen Katerina replies,

"Yes. Although, as for as Dahl goes, I was taught in polite speech to begin with. I learned how to speak casually in Dahl from listening in on the maids' everyday chatter. The base of my vocabulary is still polite speech, however, so I mixed things up sometimes when I was speaking as Florin."

"Wow, it's amazing that you picked it up in such a short time from just listening."

(Leaving the eavesdropping aside...)

Ludwik thought as he was genuinely impressed.

Receiving Ludwik's praise seems to have delighted Queen Katerina a bit. She

effuses, “I figured that I should learn Dahl casual speech for when that person comes for me and we escape the castle together, so I worked hard at it. I also explored the castle here and there, memorizing possible escape routes, looking for hidden paths, and fishing for compromising information of high officials as bargaining chips if it came down to it. It was all so much fun.”

“What, you were doing things like that?!”

“Covert operations are my forté.”

That’s not something a princess should boast about.

(It’s true that she seemed experienced in tree climbing as well. Just now as well, she tried to peek through my window to see how I was doing instead of visiting me normally... Wait, speaking of windows—) “Could it be that the suspicious person I saw on the day of the wedding was...”

“That was me. I thought that that person might come to abduct me during the wedding, so that I had to secure an escape route. Thus, I conducted a preliminary inspection of the possible escape routes...”

It appears that even Queen Katerina felt awkward admitting this as her face reddens.

(For a bride to jump from tree to tree before her wedding ceremony to look for an escape route...) How many times am I going to be shocked today? Shouldn’t a bride who suspects that she’ll be kidnapped be scared instead of eager?

(I’m starting to get a headache.)

“Umm, I think I get the gist of what’s going on now, but why did you go to the festival? Going through the trouble of disguising yourself no less.”

Ludwik didn’t understand that part. The one whom Queen Katerina likes is an Endrish man; she should have no reason to go to the festival, whose main feature is arguably the masked dance for young singles to meet each other, that Ludwik was rumored to plan on joining.

(Perhaps, to try to get ahold of blackmail on me—)

As he began to think such ominous things,

“T, that’s, I was worried about you—”

“Eh?”

Until then, Ludwik had been crestfallen, thinking, “Ah— another unrequited love, huh. In the end, I guess she never had me in her sights to begin with.”, but he felt his heart jump in a start just now.

While gazing at Ludwik with upturned eyes, Queen Katerina murmurs in a voice that sounds as if she herself is confused as well, “Well, because you really are too nice of a person... Even if I treat you coldly, you try so hard to talk to me, to smile at me... a, and at the beginning too, when I cried on the wedding night, you didn’t do anything but console me the whole time... It’s because you’re an unbelievably nice person like that—”

A nice person is in no way a compliment when it comes to love.

Yet—

Is it because Queen Katerina’s cheeks are steadily taking on more color?

Or is it because the voice that called him a nice person has confusion mixed in it?

Ludwik’s heart begins to ring as it pounds thump-thump.

“Plus, your face is refreshing and handsome, you’re sociable, you’re considerate, and the girls in the castle are all aiming to be your concubine, so —”

(She sounds as if she’s jealous... So she actually thought of me like that...) Ludwik ruminates in his mind as his face becomes hot.

“You really really are the ideal husband, so I couldn’t stay still thinking that you might have been ensnared by a malicious girl because I’m always so cold to you. A sense of duty rose within me to ascertain your rumored lover’s identity and chase her away if she’s really an assassin or a swindler after your status and wealth.”

“So that’s why you even bothered to disguise yourself to sneak out of the castle and chase after me...”

Ludwik mutters, unable to hide his growing hope from seeping into his voice.

It seemed likely that if Ludwik asked how she procured the wig and clothes to disguise herself, an answer that would ruin the sweet mood right now would come forth, so he couldn't bring himself to ask.

The queen droops her shoulders downward.

"But, there were so many people that I ended up getting lost. As I was flubbing about, you called out to me. I really thought my heart would stop back then. Ah, by the way, Florin is the name of a cat. She's not my pet cat "Assassin", but the one that that person keeps. She's a really rare blue-furred cat... Ludy? Why do you look pale? You're sweating bullets as well."

(I just realized. I wooed my own wife thinking she was another girl, didn't I...) It's understandable why she cursed at him angrily in Endrish back then. It's only natural that he was denounced as a philanderer and a swindler.

After his sudden rain of sweat passed, Ludwik bows his head down emphatically.

"I'm really sorry—!"

Flustered and confused, Queen Katerina replies,

"No, why are you apologizing? Don't."

"But, when I confessed to Florin, you were really angry and told me to go to hell."

"T, that's— I, it's true that your conduct as both a married man and the king was too imprudent— but, that wasn't the only reason that I became so emotional."

Queen Katerina averts Ludwik's gaze as if she's feeling guilty and shrinks her voice, "Weull... I— I felt my heart flutter from your words."

"Eh?"

Queen Katerina's cheeks turn redder and redder.

"Not just that time, but when I was about to fall after bumping into someone and you caught me, when you smiled gently at me as you guided me around the festival... Every time you helped me, my heart would somehow feel— strange."

“D, does that mean—”

That she’s become taken with me?

Queen Katerina lifts her face, which has been stained rosy red, and rapidly fires off as if to make an excuse, “It can’t be helped, can it! I was always shunned as a crazy princess, so I’ve never had a man be nice to me before. Being gazed at with such sweet eyes, having gentle words whispered into my ears, being led wonderfully while dancing, being k— kissed even—. All of them were for the first time. I was even confessed to so boldly—”

Gazed at by eyes glistening with bewilderment, Ludwik feels heat rise to his head, numbing his brain.

Queen Katerina says with a faint, blurred voice,

“I was afraid... of my heart beating any faster.”

So she’s saying that’s why she yelled at me in a fluster.

Ludwik’s heart throbs violently as not just his head, but his cheeks, ears, and eyes all swelter with heat.

(She’s attracted to me. She’s different from the girls who had come to me for love advice up to now. I’m in love with her as well. That Florin is actually the queen... Now, if this isn’t fate then what is?) Ludwik opens his mouth that seemed like it would burst with expectation as he grasps both her hands and cups them into one with both of his, “Let your heart beat faster and like me more and more. Because as for me, I’ve already long been smitten with you. And after that, let’s become true husband and wife.”

Queen Katerina’s response was quick.

“I can’t.”

She smoothly frees her hands from Ludwik’s grasp and announces flatly and clearly.

(Ehhhhhh! Given the current flow, why did she reject me?!)

To Ludwik, who’s stunned, she explains flatly,

“I’m a devoted girl. I can’t easily change whom I like.”

“Even though you said that I made your heart flutter just now.”

“T, that’s, I’m just not used to interacting with men. It’s not the same as love. Right, after all, my heart fluttered when I saw two twin baby bears balance themselves on a ball for the first time, when I accidentally knocked over a statue of God at the sacred temple and its neck broke off and rolled onto the ground as well, plus, when the arch priest fainted with his mouth frothing upon seeing that, and also when I was practicing throwing five knives at once and accidentally lopped off half of Father’s moustache.”

(You’re kidding me~~~~)

Probably because Ludwik was making an extremely pathetic face, Queen Katerina begins contritely, “I truly do feel bad about this. You’d be the ideal husband for any girl but me, so I think any other girl would come to like you if you court her. Someone as good of a person as you should become happy with someone worthy of you. That’s why—”

This time, it’s Queen Katerina who cups Ludwik’s hands in hers as she leans towards him and says, “While I wait for that person to come take me away, I’ll take responsibility and find the perfect girl for you!”

She’s different from the girls who have broken his heart up to now.

That hunch was correct.

There has never been a girl who proposed something so preposterous before.

“It’s a good idea, isn’t it? I’ll pursue my love and you’ll pursue yours. We’ll help each other fulfill our respective loves. Right, let’s form an alliance and become fellow comrades.”

(Comrades, you sayyy?)

Seeing his adorable wife sparkle her eyes brightly, Ludwik, her husband, was left speechless as he stared at her on and on and on.

Evelyn's Night

King Ludwik is going to secretly come to the Fall Festival!

Upon learning of such a rumor, the female knight Evelyn lost herself in a daze as she imagined herself walking bashfully alongside His Majesty through the clatter of the festival.

His Majesty is holding onto Evelyn's hand as he turns toward her with a tender gaze, "Just for tonight, could you forget that your knighthood and be my lover?"

He requests.

"Absolutely not. I'm a knight whose charge is to protect Your Highness. I could never forget my duty."

However, even as she answers, she feels like she's being sucked in by the green eyes of His Majesty.

"But, it doesn't seem like anything of the sort will happen."

As she patrols around the festival, she lets out a sigh.

The festival is livelier than normal this year due to the rumors that His Majesty would participate in secret. The young women especially have dressed themselves up with spirit to try to be noticed by His Majesty with the ambition of living a luxurious life as His Majesty's concubine.

Taking advantage of the girls' psychology, thieves pretending to be His Majesty have been running rampant stealing jewelry from them. Just from what has been reported so far, there have already been ten cases. As the situation looks like it'll only get worse from now, Evelyn was ordered to go on patrol as well.

She looks around to check if there are any suspicious persons along the dimly-lit roads with few people next to the forest as she advances clip-clop on her horse.

The thieves who pretended to be His Majesty are unforgivable.

They should be arrested, thrown into jail, and punished severely.

However, seeing the number of girls racketing about having jewelry like expensive necklaces and rings stolen from them made Evelyn realize how many girls shared the same delusion that she had, causing her to redden her face in chagrin.

She wonders if she looks the same as those girls to others.

(Kuuuh, this is too pathetic.)

She writhes by herself in agony atop her horse.

Due to Evelyn suddenly swaying her reins all over the place, the horse becomes startled, whinnying and breaking into a run. Evelyn struggles to calm her horse down but manages to do so eventually, after which she takes another sigh.

(I can't keep up like this. Even though I had been working so hard to become a fine knight, ever since King Ludwik came to the castle, I've been feeling off.) She had her head more firmly on her shoulders before and was relied upon by the maids. She had matched boys her age in ability and had had a strong sense of self.

That's right, I can't continue like this.

I'll discard my impertinent feelings toward His Majesty and return to my old self.

(Even if I come across His Majesty, who's incognito, and he invites me to enjoy the festival together, I shall decisively decline.) She tells herself with a stout heart.

After which, she mutters with a dignified voice,

"First, I have to catch the inexcusable thieves who impersonated His Majesty. Nevertheless, to be unable to tell the difference between His Majesty and a thief, how disgraceful. Even though if it were I, no matter what kind of disguise His Majesty is in, even if His face is covered by a mask, I'd be able to tell from a single glance."

Therese's Night

“Your hair is like a tidal wave of roses, your skin is like marble, your lips are like a ruby, and your eyes are like emeralds of the highest grade.

“My, you flatter me—”

While dancing, the first daughter of Duke Folma, Therese, was intoxicated by the numerous words like honey whispered into her ears.

The one who has his hands around her boasted, slender waist is a slender young man with blond hair. Like Therese, his face is covered by a mask.

There's no mistake; this person must be King Ludwik in disguise.

That his voice seems lower than when he speaks in the castle, that his shoulders and arms look sturdier somehow, and that his clothes and accessories look over the top but actually seem to be made of cheap cloth must be because he's in disguise right now.

Hearing that King Ludwik would secretly show up at the festival, Therese also snuck away to town.

After she arrived at the festival, she quickly got fed up with the sea of people.

(Who do you all think I am?! Make way! I can't search for His Majesty like this!) As she was fuming like so, the orchestra began to play. Couples formed one after another and began to dance.

In the midst of it all,

(Eh? Eh? Why are those bumpkin girls being invited to dance while I'm the only one who isn't? O, of course, anyone but His Majesty is out of the question though.) As Therese was lost in a dither like so— —Tonight, you are the one who shines the brightest like a queen. Please, bestow upon me the privilege to take your hand.

A man says as he presents his hand to her without delay.

He has blond hair and is wearing a mask.

(Could it be His Majesty?!)

Therese thought as her heart jumped in a start.

As she was stumped as to what to do being unused to this festival of commoners that she had joined, a man resembling King Ludwik dashingly appeared in front of her. This development was more than enough to convince Therese that this man is His Majesty.

Not only that, but as he danced, he would continuously hint that he's actually of noble blood with every word. That he lives a strict life normally, so tonight he wants to forget who he is and meet his ideal girl as just another man, that he had come to the festival with those expectations, that he knew from his first glance that that girl is her... He whispered such things in Therese's ears.

By this point, Therese was thoroughly convinced that this man is, without a question, King Ludwik the First.

By the lead of His Majesty, while dancing round and round,

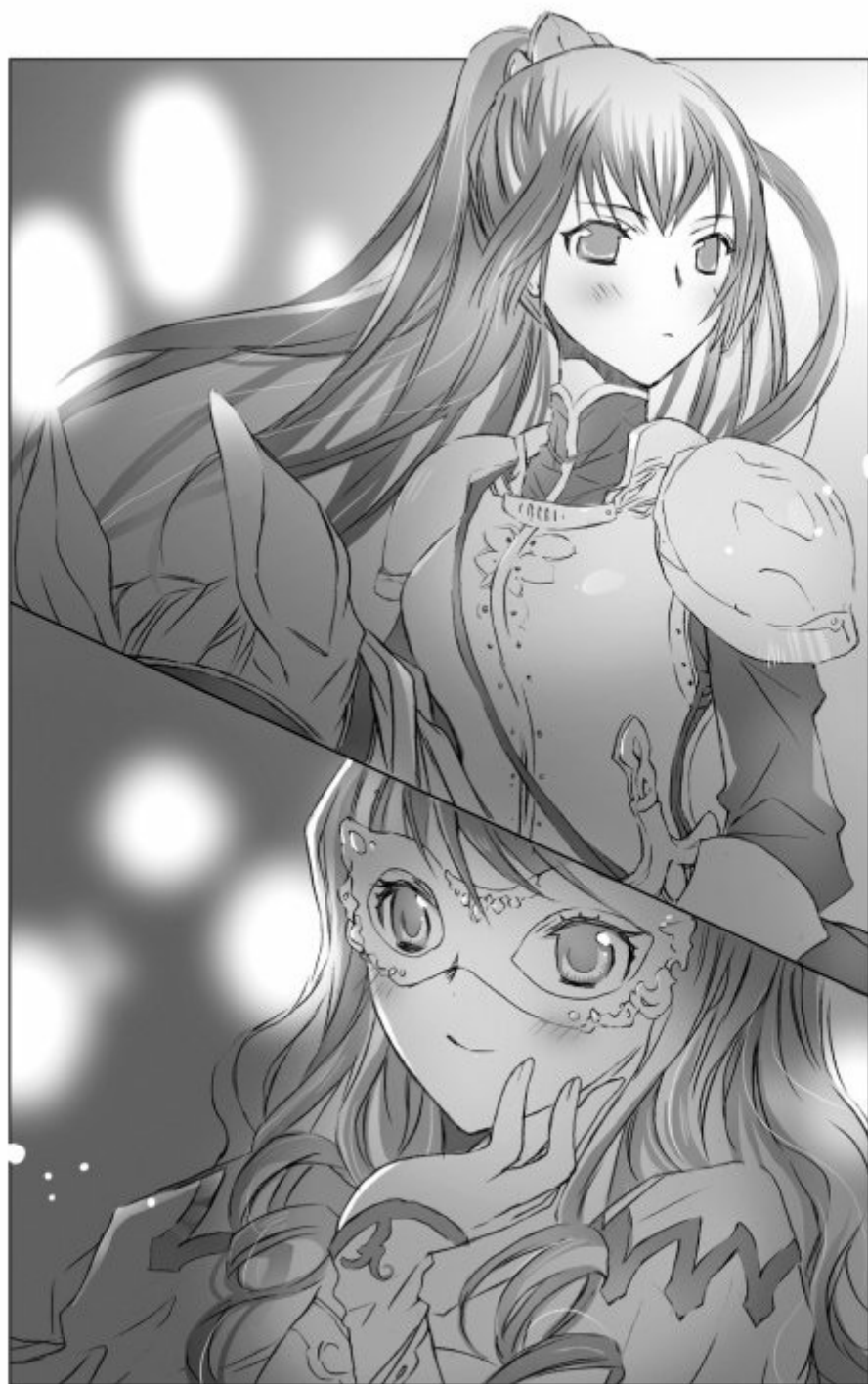
(Ahh, Your Highness picked me after all, didn't You? It may be that His Majesty called out to me because He realized that I'm Duke Folma's daughter, Therese. Yes, it must be so.) She soaks herself in the sweet feelings gushing forth endlessly within her.

—I feel like I've met you somewhere before... In the castle somewhere, was it the banquet hall?

(See, He has to be.)

While King Ludwik embraces Therese close with one hand, he lovingly caresses her around her nape.

(I'm sure that when this dance ends, His Majesty will propose to me. He'll divorce Queen Katerina and make me the queen. I have to hurry up and decide on the design of the dress that I'll wear at our wedding ceremony.) As she thought such things, Therese closed her mesmerized eyes.



Afterword

Hi there, this is Nomura Mizuki.

The new series with Ms. Takeoka, *His Noble and Righteous Route to the Harem*, has started! This is the first volume.

I've always wanted to collaborate with Ms. Takeoka on a fantasy, so much so that I pleaded to her, "Please lend me your hand for a fantasy series someday." when we met up at a party last year.

Fantasy and present-day stories both have their own merits, but the truth is I, I, I, love golden hair, so much so that I wouldn't have a problem making all the characters have golden hair. When I see a drawing of someone with pretty golden hair, I become spellbound to the point that it feels like time has stopped.

Also, golden hair and violet eyes paired together are invincible! Since I was young, I've believed that it's the most beautiful combination in this world. On top of that, if I make this character a princess, I can play with her hairstyle and her dress as much as I want. Ahhhhhhhhhhhh, I can't take this!

Yet, sadly, I couldn't find an appropriate place to add characters with golden hair or who are princesses in the stories set in the present-day that I've been writing for the last few years.

Actually, the queen was originally supposed to have silver hair and blue eyes, fitting of someone from the northern country. As usual, *His Noble...* began as a single chapter manuscript that had nowhere to go, but when I talked to my editor around winter last year, we felt like it could shape up to be something good and so we're here. But, even after I submitted my final manuscript and was in the process of picking an illustrator, the queen still did not have golden hair yet. After the new year began and my *Vampire* series ended earlier than expected, I thought, "Well then, I'd like to have Ms. Takeoka illustrate for *His Noble...!*" and was able to have her accept my request without a hiccup.

And then, I figured, if I'm going to have Ms. Takeoka illustrate for the series,

then I want to have the queen be a golden-haired violet eyed princess so as not to leave any regrets, so I edited her appearance accordingly. When I was shown the queen's character design, "Golden hair~, violet eyes~~, a princess in a white dress~~~~", I was moved to tears like so.

One more thing, this new series is also the harem story I've always wanted to write.

Back around when I was writing *Bad! Daddy, Usa Koi, and Bungaku Shoujo*, I did work as a scenario writer for an R18 game. I actually got the job as windfall from a food writer that I got to know from my hobby of reading food blogs. I was worried that someone as computer illiterate as I am and who has never touched games even once before wouldn't be able to handle the job, but fortunately, with everyone helping me out, I was able to write multiple stories to completion in one go. That made me feel so happy and joyful, and I wrote those stories fully engrossed in their world.

As I did that, I began to think that I want to try completing a story of a happy harem, and while it wasn't perfect, I was able to complete something I was satisfied with. I had wanted to novelize the above game scenario that I wrote for many years, but it would probably struggle to sell, and so I decided to write a new story of a harem as a novel and started planning accordingly. It was difficult to get the green light this time as well. That's why, I'm thankful to various persons that I'm able to bring you all *His Noble...* this time.

I'd like to try my best to write a story that makes one think, "Everyone being happy together is nice as well~" heartwarmingly, but also rends one's heart in sadness. Of course, for Ludy and the girls to reach that paradise, there are still many troubles they must overcome however.

Ah, the queen's national language was rea~~~~lly sloppily constructed and basically has no consistency, so if you could please not try to analyze it and just leave it be... (It's impossible to begin with.)

Lastly, an update on something like a spin-off for *Vampire*. It's set to be published next year, and the precise release date will be announced by Famitsu Bunkou within the year, so please wait just a little longer.

The second volume of *His Noble...* will be released two months later, on

January 30th. I'll be in your care the next volume as well.

2015/10/15 Nomura Mizuki